

# Books, Boredom, and Behind Bars: An Explanation of Apathy and Hostility in Our Schools

Randle W. Nelsen,<sup>1</sup>  
lakehead university

Schooling is socialization that standardizes, and often eliminates, emotions to fit the bureaucratic routine of corporate workplaces. Student "deviants" who resist this standardization by making public their boredom with school must face the attempts of "authorities" to coerce them into "adjusting" to a school reality shaped and maintained in the socio-economic image of the larger culture. It is argued that (1) the actions of these deviants should be taken seriously as the most visible tip of a school iceberg filled with apathy and hostility, and (2) the first step in changing this situation is to remake schools into non-compulsory and more community-grounded institutions.

La scolarisation est un phénomène de socialisation qui standardise et élimine quelquefois les émotions dans le but de faire adapter l'individu à la routine bureaucratique des emplois du système corporatif. Les étudiants "déviant" qui résistent à la standardisation en affichant publiquement combien ils s'ennuient à l'école, doivent faire face aux efforts que font les "autorités" qui essaient de les forcer à "s'ajuster" à un système scolaire qui est à l'image socio-économique de l'environnement culturel prévalent. On discute de deux choses: (1) que l'on devrait sérieusement considérer les actions de ces "déviant" comme étant la pointe visible d'un iceberg scolaire formé d'apathie et d'hostilité et (2) qu'il faudrait commencer par transformer les écoles en institutions dont la fréquentation serait facultative et qui seraient plus orientées sur la communauté.

"The Trouble in Our Schools" written in blood across a damaged blackboard was the cover announcing the feature article for the September 5, 1981 edition of *Today*. Readers of this magazine supplement to their weekend newspapers were invited to greet the new school year with reports from Newfoundland to Vancouver which told them that not all was well with Canadian schools. The reporters ran through what is by now for many a list of familiar complaints: declining academic standards; irrelevancy of curricula; problems regarding busing along with greater centralization; depersonalization, and increasing rates of truancy; early school leaving; and vandalism. What follows is an attempt to describe, explore, and explain some of the possible interrelationships among these last three (truancy or school skipping, early school leaving or "dropping out," and vandalism) by analyzing both the school as a cultural environment and the larger culture that surrounds it.

## SCHOOLING, BOREDOM AND DEVIANCY: VANDALS, SKIPPERS, AND EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

According to *Today*, the school repair bill paid by Vancouver taxpayers for just one year (1980) was \$688,400 (see Budgen, 1981, p. 17). The bill to repair windows alone, nothing else, came to over one-third of this amount, \$254,200 in 1980. At just one school of predominantly middle-class students, Kitsilano Secondary School, \$18,000 was spent

to fix broken windows, kicked-in and bent locker doors, holes poked in plaster and ceiling tiles, broken automatic door-closing mechanisms and locks gummed up with epoxy glue. Missing signs and a stair railing had to be replaced; washroom graffiti had to be painted over or washed off; broken toilets had to be repaired. (Budgen, 1981, pp. 17–18)<sup>2</sup>

In Thunder Bay the school district is considerably smaller and so too is the bill to repair both “willful” and “naturally occurring” damage to school property. Still, schools in Thunder Bay constitute *the* major target according to a 1978 study which shows that damage to school property accounts for 43% of the total cost of vandalism to all public property in the city (Stewart, Rawlinson, Letwin, and Stephenson, 1978, pp. 51, 53). The people doing this damage, “the offenders” in the language of the study, were predominantly male (94%) and fell mostly into two age categories, 11–15 and 16–18 (pp. 46–47). A sample composed of senior elementary and high school students, a cross-section of community residents, and the police was unable to attribute more responsibility to any one socio-economic class over others (low, middle, or upper) for this school vandalism (pp. 27–28).<sup>3</sup>

The Thunder Bay researchers define vandalism as “the willful defacing or damaging of property belonging to another person or to the public” (Stewart et al., 1978, p. 3). Using Stanley Cohen’s (1973, pp. 34–50) categories the researchers breakdown acts of vandalism based upon the subjective motives of the vandals: acquisitive, tactical, ideological, vindictive, play, and malicious vandalism. These labels having been used and the associated distinctions made, the key feature of almost all types of vandalism continues to concern the conscious use of force and/or violence to break established norms or rules. With a few exceptions, vandalism is usually an expression of hostility and oftentimes of a value structure foreign and sometimes unknown to the makers of the rules. In brief, to be a vandal means actively to express hostility in altering your environment – to be “looking for toughness, excitement, action and a sense of control” (S. Cohen, 1973, p. 50) – qualities, Cohen goes on to point out, not often found at school.

Students seem to be at least semi-aware that school is a very constraining institution. One way of exercising some control is to skip school. While Crespo (1974) was a participant observer in an urban, French-speaking, comprehensive Québec high school located in a low-income area, he interviewed a sample of 45 students who had been absent 21 days or more during the academic year.<sup>4</sup> He found that these school skippers, many of whom eventually became early school leavers, were heavily concentrated in the lower academic tracks. These tracks are taught by the youngest and newest teachers painfully aware of the low status reflected by their teaching assignments. Lower track students, like their teachers, are also aware of and displeased with their low status. Most important, then, are Crespo's (1974, p. 139) observations that these students' already low opinion of themselves was systematically reconfirmed by teacher communications which continually told them that they were sub-par intellectually and a teaching burden.

What results is "a consciousness of kind"<sup>5</sup> around which a social group of lower track students patterns interaction. This process first begins when those new to the lower tracks are placed with a high proportion of those students who have already skipped school, thereby increasing the likelihood of being invited to skip with newly-found lower track friends. Second, as Crespo's data clearly show (1974, pp. 133, 135), school skipping is often an enjoyable experience which provides these students with a positive contrast to their experiences in school. In addition to this enjoyment gained from skipping and the accompanying assessment/reassessment of school's importance, a third factor involving the excitement and anxiety tied up with possibly being caught may reinforce the skipping experience and lead to systematic skipping. However, this same social process that leads into school skipping may also result in abandoning such behaviour as "very often skipping friends abandon skipping at about the same time" (Crespo, 1974, p. 138).

None of the above should be very surprising to even casual observers of human interaction. Several of the major sociological theories explaining the causes of delinquent behaviour could easily account for Crespo's findings concerning skipping. One might move, for example, from Sutherland's (1947) theory of "differential association,"<sup>6</sup> to Cohen's (1955) theory of a delinquency subculture based upon working-class patterns of socialization, to Matza's (1961) statement of the "Subterranean Traditions of Youth" which became the basis for his later view that the young tended to "drift" into delinquency (see Matza, 1964), to the most recent findings of Linden and Fillmore (1981, p. 353) that "the variable of ties of delinquent peers is the most important factor in explaining delinquency in all four groups" they studied.

Similarly, recent studies by Willis (1977), Corrigan (1979), and Everhart (1983) point to the importance of informal group friendship ties. These ties constitute the basic source of counter-school culture resistance to school authority relations. In the words of participant observer Willis: "The most basic, obvious and explicit dimension of counter-school culture is entrenched general and personalised opposition to 'authority'" (1977, p. 11). The research findings of all three authors make it very clear that this opposition, as expressed in struggles over "appropriate" or "authority-approved" dress for school and other issues such as when and where smoking or drinking is to take place, goes beyond individual personality differences to question the legitimacy of school as an institution.

From this perspective one really does not need the delinquency theorists to shed light on skipping or truancy. One can view it simply as part of a pattern of passive resistance or noncooperation which points to the school reality that "being in the classroom and being educated by the teacher are two very different things" (Corrigan, 1979, p. 45). Corrigan elaborates:

In the classrooms of the British education system this is called, variously, 'mucking about in class' and 'not paying attention'. Far from being a minority activity, this constitutes a majority activity, for much of the time, for the boys. Therefore truancy must be seen as an extreme action; "dolling off" as less extreme; "mucking about" as a major activity and "not paying attention" as endemic. (p. 45)

The more passive side of school skipping is highlighted when the skippers return to the classroom. According to Crespo, a common strategy is to cover the fact of having skipped by maintaining a very low profile in class. Too active an attempt to catch up or to understand missed material provides a good opportunity for the teacher to rebuke the skipper, so "the disinterested and anonymous impression they [the skippers] maintain merely suggests to the teachers that they are just part of that general body of bored and mediocre students" (Crespo, 1974, p. 138).

Indeed, *many students* – be they skippers, vandals, early school leavers, eventual graduates, or any combination of these – *are bored with school*. The pervasiveness of self-reported student boredom has been amply documented in several studies completed during the last decade (see Crespo, 1974, especially p. 133; Willis, 1977, pp. 33–44; Anderson and Ridley, 1978, pp. 10, 150; Corrigan, 1979, pp. 53, 65, 80; Dean, 1979, especially p. 126; Beaulieu, 1981, p. 251).<sup>7</sup> It is not merely happenstance, then, that all three resistance-to-school researchers, using the slightly differing language of the different groups of kids they studied, uncover and analyze the same phenomenon. Whether it is "having a laff" in

Willis's hometown of Hammertown, "carrying on" in Corrigan's Sunderland, or "goofing off" in Everhart's Jefferson, the kids are all responding at least in part to the reality of school boredom. They also are responding to the classroom power of the teacher as Corrigan (1979) explains: "'Carrying on' represents *at one and the same time* taking no notice of the teacher, being aware of the teacher's power, and doing what the teacher doesn't want you to do" (p.58).

It is important to clarify this complex set of connections between boredom, the power situation of the classroom, and the school as an institution created by and representative of the larger socio-economic system. I do not want to be misunderstood as arguing that school is the only place where kids are bored. Several Smash Street Kids told Corrigan (1979, p. 48) that they were bored with the holidays and were waiting for school to begin again so they would have regularized contact with their friends or "mates." Corrigan's work presents clear evidence that the boys he studied get into trouble on the streets as well as in school. In fact it is within the context of the relative freedom of a Saturday night on the streets rather than in school and school-related activities that the boys, as initiators of action often gain a strong feeling of community – a feeling which also makes a statement about school rules. "If the boys want to go around breaking rules, then that is easy enough. However, the major aspect of rules for these boys is the power of the enforcer rather than the existence of the rules in abstract, as a thing apart from the activity" (Corrigan, 1979, p. 140). Thus, as Corrigan points out: "... it was they (the Smash Street Kids) and not I who identified the major problem as being the state involvement in a *law* forcing them to go to school" (p. 147).

This theme of compulsion and the structure of power in relation to schooling looms large in the Corrigan, as well as the present, analysis. On the connection between truancy and the compelling power of the state as the kids studied understand it Corrigan (1979) says:

Of the several questions asked about truancy in the questionnaire and in the interview, the importance of the sanction was constantly mentioned by the boys, whereas only a few commented on the rightness or wrongness of truancy. The major restraint upon increased truancy therefore was a recognition of power rather than a moral compliance. (pp. 24–25)

In short, "... the only possible way to make sense of their [the boys'] words and actions is in terms of the power of the school rather than its values" (p. 61). In other words, a values analysis focused upon school culture provides only a partial and inadequate explanation for what goes on in school (boredom, truancy, vandalism, resistance, and nonresistance to school work). Thus, the following analysis, in directing attention to the structure

and process of schooling, begins by recognizing that the school remains responsive to and largely reflects the prevailing socio-economic arrangements of the larger culture which has created and shaped it.

#### SCHOOLING AND EMOTIONALITY: GROWING UP TO REAL WORK IN TODAY'S OFFICE BUREAUCRACIES AND FACTORIES

Present socio-economic arrangements are not currently producing enough useful and dignifying work for students to grow up into. Goodman (1960) spoke plainly about this situation – about the absurdity of growing up in the United States – some 25 years ago: “The plain truth is that at present very many of us are useless, not needed, rationally unemployable. It is in this paradoxical atmosphere that young persons grow up. It looks busy and expansive, but it is rationally at a stalemate” (pp. 31–32).

It should be remembered, of course, that those who “drop out” of school on or before their sixteenth birthday (the legal school-leaving age) or get what is today the minimum certification requirement for finding a job, a high school diploma, are faced with a far more hostile socio-economic environment than the youth of whom Goodman was writing. In the 1950s there was nearly “full employment” for a large percentage of the population, less emphasis upon advertising and refining the role of consumer, much more available work in the construction trades and the manufacturing sector, and a larger percentage of people working the land (today the farm population does not even amount to 5% of all Canadians). In brief, there was more work then than now and, because it was more closely tied to primary production, it was in the minds of many “real work” – work worth doing.

Even those who survive the boredom and financial expense of school to receive high school diplomas and university degrees must also face the problem of finding real work. In most cases these graduates – benefiting from tremendous expenditures on advertising and related public relations which have resulted in the growth of both public (government) and private service bureaucracies – trade paper shuffling, looking busy, the appearance of freedom, and a little prestige for actually being busy on a job with some substance.

Since Goodman wrote, the deadly routine and unyielding supervision of the factory assembly-line have been transferred to the office video screen, and the boring lack of substance in most jobs has not been made any more bearable because the worker's collar is white rather than blue. However, as French sociologist Pierre Dubois (1979) has ably demon-

strated, blue-collar workers are often less willing to “take it” – to put up with work as they find it today – than are their white-collar counterparts, the graduates. Why? Precisely because these graduates have been so well-schooled, trained to be accepting of, and to smoothly function within the bureaucratized atmosphere of the modern workplace.

### *Schooling for Bureaucracy*

For most Canadian children school is the first bureaucratic organization they experience first-hand. There are two crucially important lessons taught students of all ages at all levels of schooling. The first – well known to those familiar with the work of, among others, McLuhan (1964)<sup>8</sup> and Illich (1972) – has been succinctly stated by Farber (1970):

It's not *what* you're taught that does the harm but *how* you're taught. In fact, for most of your school life, it doesn't make that much difference what subject you're taught. The real lesson is the method. The medium in school truly is the message. And the medium is, above all, coercive ... (pp. 19–20)

The second lesson has been clearly stated by Friedenberg (1963):

An extremely important social function of the school – and, I believe a major reason for our continued unquestioned support of it – is to protect society from “subjectivity”; from people with an excessively personal style or approach to situations, who threaten or antagonize their co-workers, fellow citizens, and indeed, in extreme cases, society itself ... (p. 177)

Or, again in the slightly more colourful language used by Farber (1970): “Colleges, for the most part, aren't set up to accommodate real people. They're tooled to process Ken and Barbie Dolls” (p. 66).

The result, the consequences, of learning these two lessons are students strongly attuned to, if not addicted to, authority and standardization. Form (style) becomes the content. It is the perfect education (?), training, for people required to look busy (required to shuffle paper and people rather than to produce or provide much of substance) so that they can hang on to their jobs. On the path to their diplomas and degrees student subordinates have learned how to take direction (to cooperate) without worrying too much about whether or not the directions make sense to them; the best part, from the prospective employer's point of view, is that they do so in an uncomplaining (unemotional) way. It is the perfect training for potential employees required to function in a bureaucracy where a specialized administrative hierarchy governs authority relations among career-oriented (time-serving) and impersonally detached

officials attempting to maintain an efficient social distance from clients by the neutral application of explicit rules and regulations – a system of standards (see Blau, 1956, pp. 27–36).<sup>9</sup>

To function in this manner either as a student or an employee means that emotionality (subjectivity) has been to a significant degree schooled out of you. “Excessively” subjective people find it difficult to play this bureaucratic role for too long. In brief, some individuals resist attempts to forcibly control and standardize their behaviour.

*Schooling for Vandalism, Skipping, and Early Leaving*

It is my contention that vandals, skippers, and early school leavers taken together are a good case to illustrate this point. Part of the Thunder Bay vandalism study attempted to do some “personality testing” using some standard tests – these included the Minnesota Multi-Phasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), the Bristol Social Adjustment Scale, and the High School Personality Questionnaire (HSPQ). Wary as I am of this type of testing, and research which is overly dependent upon it, the findings of the Thunder Bay researchers are most instructive.

The 25 “delinquents” tested (23 of whom reported having engaged in “vandalism”) “possessed a lower to slightly lower intelligence capability than is indicated by the normal score for this test [the HSPQ]. Also the persons surveyed were considerably more assertive, aggressive, competitive, and stubborn” (Stewart et al., 1978, pp. 59–60). (The “more” refers to expectations based upon the degree to which these characteristics have been present in previous studies of “normal” populations.) The vandalism study’s authors continue: “Our group exhibited a disregard for rules, a liking for adventure, and tended to be socially bold, thick-skinned and compulsive” (p. 60).

Granted many, if not all, of these terms should be operationally defined but even without such definitions, one might assume generally accepted meanings to argue that this personality profile of Thunder Bay vandals is not the ideal sought by bureaucrats within or outside of the school. In short, school socialization has failed them and they, in turn, have failed the school by failing to subdue their emotions to school authority and standardization.

SCHOOL, JOBS, EMOTIONALITY, AND “THE LADS” OF THE WORKING CLASS<sup>10</sup>

Finally, it should be emphasized that even though the schooling-for-bureaucracy process is often successfully resisted by vandals, skippers, and early school leavers – a large percentage of whom are from working-

class backgrounds – there still is an important tie between school and postschool employment for these resisters. Willis (1977), in his study of how working-class kids get working-class jobs, found a strong connection between counter-school culture and the working-class culture of the shopfloor where “the lads” labour after leaving school.

One of the main shopfloor culture themes observed by Willis in the industries of the Midlands is a thoroughgoing attempt to gain control of the work process. He convincingly points out that the elements of this attempt (limiting output, using a distinctive form of language together with a well-developed intimidatory humour as well as an equally sophisticated repertoire of physical humour or practical jokes, and emphasizing the practicality of doing rather than theorizing) are “effectively mirrored for us by working class kids’ attempts, with the aid of the resources of their culture, to take control of classes, substitute their own unofficial timetables, and control their own routines and life spaces” (Willis, 1977, p. 53).<sup>11</sup> The result is that “in the short to middle term ‘the lads’ experience in the counter-school culture most certainly smooths their transition into work and produces appetites which manual work satisfies quite well” (p. 108). Thus, without the help of “successful” academic achievement, the experience of school for most working-class lads, as with the experience for most middle-class kids who often achieve a measure of academic (bureaucratic) success, helps to produce “the right attitudes” for the type of jobs the kids from both backgrounds are likely to get.

School, then, plays an important role in reproducing the prevailing socio-economic arrangements which continue to recreate and sustain class differences. Not only are the working-class lads different because they feel they have to oppose rather than conform to the formal schooling process in order to make it fit with their future work world, but they also are different because in their workplaces, as is the case in school, they do not expect satisfaction (see Willis, 1977, pp. 102–103). Their attitude about the changeover from school to work, a changeover usually welcomed because one finally gets free of the seemingly senseless rules and regulations of the former and earns money at the latter, is well-summarized by Corrigan (1979): “... the boys don’t see their world in terms of choice and career; when the job comes it comes in a harsh and real form. It shares certain things with school; you have to go and it’s boring,” (p. 92).

Thus, even though Corrigan’s Smash Street Kids and Willis’s lads resist joining the conformists from the working class, “the ear’oles” (see Willis, 1977, pp. 13–21), and most middle class kids in subduing and standardizing their emotions to school authority, they eventually acquiesce to a framework of prior authority relations in the postschool world of work.

Within this framework there is still a “them” and an “us,” but it is here, on the job, that “their [working class] culture accomplishes a recognition of, and an accommodation to, the facts of power and hierarchy” (Willis, 1977, p. 109). Willis elaborates with the following:

In the moment of the establishment of a cultural opposition is the yielding of a hope for direct, or quasi-political, challenge. The ‘them and us’ philosophy is simultaneously a rescue and confirmation of the direct, the human and the social, and a giving up – at any conscious level – of claims to control the underworkings of these things: the real power relationships. (pp. 109–110)

Corrigan’s (1979) findings support those of Willis as *most* of the working-class boys he studied had abandoned claims to control the real power relationships as well as abandoning the notion of even being satisfied at work. And yet, while there was “no clear, hard-and-fast *reasoned choice*” based upon a career concept, a rather sizeable minority of “29 per cent specified that the most important *reason* for *choosing* a job must be that it is interesting” (Corrigan, 1979, p. 76). The school increasingly will be called upon to “cool out” (see Clark, 1960) or emotionally subdue these 29% of the working class who are still looking for “interesting” jobs and also an even higher percentage in the middle class, many of whom already are experiencing a phenomenon long part of working-class life – having to learn how to separate one’s inner self from work. This expanding role of the school should make students even more apathetic and hostile toward it as the school’s coolant role is played out in a 1980s economy of unconscionably high unemployment (both official and hidden) and underemployment that make the 1950s economy of Goodman’s lament look just short of paradise. In today’s economy school-age kids from all class backgrounds are becoming increasingly aware that often just finding a job, any job, is a stroke of very good luck. In brief, interesting work based upon a well-thought out career choice may become, even more than it is today, the exclusive province of those few children from the privileged governing-class families who control the real power relationships joined by a few others from families of upper middle-class professionals who serve them.

#### SCHOOL DEVIANCY AND DISCIPLINE: STUDENT APATHY AND HOSTILITY, AND THE RESPONSES OF SOCIAL ANALYSTS AND SCHOOL AUTHORITIES

More than a decade ago Berger (1972) wrote an article on youth cultures. While he stressed the great variety to be found among them, still what the cultures of “delinquents and bohemians and campus radicals and even some high school hot rodders and college fraternity boys have in common

is ... their youthfulness, that is, their tendency to behave in patterned ways normatively hedonistic, irresponsible, and expressive" (p. 182). Later Berger links these normative characteristics of all youth cultures to the oft-repeated sociological cant that persons holding the lower-working class jobs "tend to be hedonistic, unable to plan ahead or defer gratification, are highly expressive ... given to violent and extreme views, irrational, anti-intellectual, "person-centered" (rather than "role-centered"), and generally neglectful of their civic responsibilities" (pp. 189–190).

In my view Berger, with his emphasis upon the irresponsible and less-than-rational fun to be found in youth cultures, has it backwards – at least for the so-called delinquents. It is these youth (the vandals, the school skippers, and the early school leavers) who, in questioning the authority of the school to command their time and attention, are acting both responsibly and rationally. For it is they who are squarely facing both the reality of school boredom and the clear evidence that there is not much compelling opportunity beyond school. By skipping and leaving school at an early age they are "voting with their feet" to give up the frivolous fantasy of school life. And it is this that is most abhorrent to "the authorities." For these school deviants are very visibly expressing (making public) the school-is-boredom and growing-up-absurd reality of their everyday experience to the wider society.

This experience has been well documented recently by Dean (1979) in Hamilton, Ontario. When Dean asked his sample of 86 Grade 11 and Grade 12 high school students the open-ended question: "What are the biggest problems that you face in school?" he found by far the largest percentages could be grouped into two related categories – 45% indicated that the school work is not interesting and 42% talked about boredom (p. 126). There also seems to be some perceived connection between this boredom and violence. In answering the question "What are the main causes of violence in your school?" 35% of Dean's sample (12% higher than the second place category) responded by listing the problems of boredom and/or frustration (p. 135).

The studies in England by Willis (1977) and Corrigan (1979), as well as the America-based inquiry of Everhart (1983), provide a good deal of evidence that would support Dean (1979) against those who might question and criticize his study for being narrowly confined to only a small area of one Canadian city. The representativeness of his findings also is supported by the recent report of the task force on vandalism throughout Ontario chaired by Lucien A. Beaulieu (1981). The task force found boredom to be among the most common reasons given by vandals themselves to explain their behaviour (Beaulieu, 1981, p. 251). Further criti-

cism of both these studies of Dean and Beaulieu might turn on the argument that since connections have been made between both student liking for and successful achievement in school,<sup>12</sup> this self-reporting of student boredom should be seen as self-serving. Yet, this criticism seems less plausible as one continues to examine how both students and the authorities respond to these perceived major problems of uninteresting work and boredom.

When Dean asked his respondents, "How do you respond to these problems?" (again allowing them more than one answer), 27% could not/did not answer at all, 25% said they "do nothing," 24% "daydream," while another 31% – the highest figure in any category – simply "wait until evening or weekend." The lowest categories (and it is recognized that an under-reporting argument could be made here) were school skipping and vandalism with only 16% and 9% reporting that they engaged in this sort of behaviour, and just 7% saying they responded by using alcohol and other drugs (Dean, 1979, p. 129). Clearly, then, the vast majority of Dean's sample seem to be finding several apathetic alternatives to the most obvious ways of "not attending."

The responses of school authorities to all varieties of non-attendance and vandalism are instructive. At the institutional level they have followed a number of how-to-manuals regarding what is called "target-hardening" (Vestermarck and Blauvelt, 1978; White and Fallis, 1979, 1980; Beaulieu, 1981). Exemplary is the following list of measures, found in a report evaluating the effectiveness of Project Pride in reducing Thunder Bay school vandalism during 1980, taken by the Lakehead Board of Education: "installing a centrally monitored, silent alarm motion detector system; replacing glass with polycarbonates; applying wire mesh on windows; reducing access to roofs; installing steel doors; and considering vandalism prevention in the design of new additions" (Lakehead Board of Education, n.d., p. 1). The Lakehead Board is not alone in implementing these measures and as many schools begin to take on this fortress-like appearance of jails and similar custodial institutions of incarceration (mental asylums, concentration camps, etc.), one might logically expect that deviant students will be treated more and more like hardened criminals<sup>13</sup>

Turning to the individual level, authorities have stopped short of "the ministry of shocks" practiced by a Michigan minister who has been using, until a recent court order forced him to desist, a home-made "electrical stool" as an instruction aid for helping recalcitrant 7- and 8-year-old children to better comprehend Biblical teachings (see *the Globe and Mail*, 1981, p. 13). Nor do we grant principals, school board members, mayors, and the like the authority granted to the prefect of ancient Rome that "if

any student in the City should fail to conduct himself as the dignity of a liberal education demands, he shall be publicly flogged ... expelled from the City and returned home" (Pharr, 1952, p. 414).

While toady's authorities continue to engage in a mild form of flogging by employing the strap and its equivalents, they are a bit more subtle (and some might argue more dangerous) than either the Romans or the Michigan minister. Often their closest confidants are the consulting psychologists who help bring wayward students into line with the school's behavioural expectations. And when the school psychologists need aid they often turn to psychiatrists and other medical doctors who direct pharmacists to provide doses of Ritalin and other amphetamines, thereby daily drugging thousands of Canadian and American school children into acceptable classroom behaviour (Rapoport, 1974, pp. 71-74; Repo, 1974, pp. 75-91; Gray, 1975, pp. 423-425).<sup>14</sup>

Finally, when these more ordinary disciplinary procedures fail to keep students from leaving school, they are jailed. Statistics compiled by John McGoff, child advocate at the Metropolitan Toronto Observation and Detention Centre, show that 42 Toronto youths with no delinquent charge against them other than truancy had been, as a group, confined for well over 100 days (about one-third of this time being spent in maximum security facilities) within the first five months of 1981 (see *The Times News* of Thunder Bay, May 27, 1981, p. 4).

Jailing truants is obvious evidence that the authorities, unlike Berger and others who make the youth cultures and/or deviancy-as-fun arguments, consider skipping school to be a serious activity. It is serious because these skippers are refusing to permit the school authorities, on behalf of the larger culture, to define and standardize them. But its even more than this: for the most important part of this negation is their refusal to subordinate self – to depersonalize their unique subjectivity in favour of the traditional rules, regulations and standardized operating procedures of the larger socio-economic system. They are not willing to cooperate in their own bureaucratization – a processing which is, as I have argued, at the very heart of school socialization. In brief, unlike the thoroughly schooled individuals, these deviant "holdouts" refuse to cooperate with school authorities in taking an increasingly heavier hand, at each successive school level, in processing their own "adjustment" to prevailing socio-economic arrangements.

It is disturbing but altogether too typical, given my understanding of sociology's promise, to note that the importance of these arrangements is either virtually ignored or greatly downplayed in most current solutions and explanations offered by sociologists and other supposed *social* analysts in both Canada and the U. S. Thus, while authorities are building

fortress-like school structures and using the jails to forcibly control and detain school deviants, both the Ontario task force report on vandalism (Beaulieu, 1981, pp. 164–165) and some of the latest analytical wisdom from American observers (U. S. Senate, 1977; Rubel, 1980, p. 20; Duke, 1980, p. 31) advocate individualistic solutions emphasizing increased attention to the role obligations of the school principal and the responsibility of the student offender. To the extent that the argument presented herein is correct these individualistic solutions not only ignore the social context of school deviancy, but they also constitute what is most certainly a type of *blaming the victim* (Ryan, 1971) argument put into practice.

With specific reference again to the Ontario task force report, a careful reading indicates consideration given to avoid laying blame. The price of such consideration seems a rather successful attempt to avoid altogether the search for causal explanations. To use the language of the report: “[However], an important point made throughout this report is that it is pointless to look for causes in particular groups, institutions, agencies or governments” (Beaulieu, 1981, p. 25). The task force members certainly seem to have followed their own advice when it comes to looking for causes among groups of educators and educational institutions/agencies. For, while there is a 25-page chapter entitled “Causes of Vandalism,” I cannot find even one hint that the task force has considered that schools – the educational system – may be a contributing source of the vandalism problem (Beaulieu, 1981, pp. 453–68).

Official explanations of school deviancy which ignore the school culture and the wider socio-economic system that creates and maintains it are not uncommon. Generally speaking, one gets closer to reality by asking students to explain their own situation. Thus, in a 1979 Thunder Bay study of 221 “dropouts,” 22% claimed a dislike for school or teachers, with 15% saying they just weren’t interested; yet officials commenting upon this study blamed everything – family problems, personality, poor health and pregnancy – but the school (Moore, 6 October 1979, p. 13). Here as in the task force report (Beaulieu, 1981, pp. 271–286) it was the students, not school officials or task force members, who routinely brought the school into their analyses and explanations by placing school culture within its larger socio-economic context.

#### THE BEGINNINGS OF A POSSIBLE SOLUTION: GET RID OF COMPULSORY SCHOOLING AND DEVELOP COMMUNITY-BASED, VOLUNTARY LEARNING

What today’s students are saying is relatively simple to understand: Many find learning in schools an uninteresting, boring, and impersonal standardization to bureaucratic routine. Further, there is the hard reality that

this schooling process is socialization they are compelled by law to engage in.<sup>15</sup> Those students who manage to retain a less-schooled identity healthy enough to resist this forced processing are treated increasingly less like learners and more like prisoners – school buildings take on an ever more jail-like appearance and students are faced with more restrictive disciplinary measures.

They are faced as well with a psychology of social control in which counsellors (school officials, psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers) help them “meaningfully adjust” to, rather than meaningfully change, this school reality and the larger socio-economic system it represents. To draw again on Goodman (1964) who has insightfully expressed this fundamental connection between the pedagogical psychology of the modern school community and the surrounding social order: “One has the impression that our social-psychologists are looking not to a human community but to a future in which the obsessionals will take care of the impulsives!” (p. 22)

Later in *Compulsory Mis-education* Goodman (1964) states “the problem” even more baldly:

The advance-guard problem is that the compulsory school system, like the whole of our economy, politics, and standard of living, has become a lockstep. It is no longer designed for the maximum growth and future practical utility of the children into a changing world, but is inept social engineering for extrinsic goals, pitifully short-range. (p. 45)

Goodman’s (1964) solution, like my own, is easily stated: *Get rid of compulsory schooling*.

The compulsory system has become a universal trap, and it is no good. Very many of the youth, both poor and middle class, might be better off if the system simply did not exist, even if they then had no formal schooling at all. ...

Even when it (the school system) is benevolent, it is in the bureaucratic death-grip of a uniformity of conception from the universities down, that cannot possibly suit the multitude of dispositions and conditions. Yet 100% of the children are supposed to remain for at least 12 years in one kind of box ... Thus, if we are going to experiment with real universal education that educates, we have to start by getting rid of compulsory schooling altogether. (pp 31, 45–46)

Goodman’s proposals concerning the relevant necessity of outside-of-school “maturing activity” and the abolition of grading (Goodman, 1964, pp. 122–130) are still more feasible than those of later deschooling proponents such as Illich (1972, especially pp. 103–150),<sup>16</sup> but as beginning steps towards unlocking the compulsory schooling mentality they remain, some 20 years later, largely untried. If, as I have argued here,

hostility and apathy – as manifested in vandalism, school skipping and early school leaving – are created by the school culture which in turn is largely shaped by and corresponds to the culture of the surrounding socio-economic order, then it makes sense to try these alternatives.

Recent research regarding student hostility is encouraging as it indicates there has been almost no violence in alternative school settings where enforced learning has been replaced by a personalized humanness that supports individual and collective growth within a learning setting based upon the principle of voluntarism (see Kulka, Mann and Kligel, 1980, p. 59; Richardson, 1980).<sup>17</sup> This kind of learning is worlds apart from the current fascination with a technological fix of video-screen machines “teaching” programmed-learning packages. This fix not only treats students, teachers, and administrators as personnel but also dehumanizes and depersonalizes school culture in the image of the program packagers. These packagers are the largest bureaucratic and global corporations (IBM, RCA, Time-Life, ATT, ITT, Singer, Xerox, etc.) whose grip on “the knowledge business” helps to shape and maintain the culture of the larger socio-economic system in North America and worldwide (e.g., see Seltzer and Karger, 1974).

It is most important that we attempt to begin loosening this corporate grip on learning by establishing, as quickly as possible, noncompulsory community-based schools. The establishments of such schools would give primacy to much evidence concerning what’s wrong with today’s compulsory education – evidence emphasizing that students often learn more of what they want to know outside of school walls than within them and that the “deviancy” observed among school-age youngsters is in important ways related to the school context. Thus, it is not merely happenstance which accounts for the finding of several studies (Backman, Queen and Wivaneu, 1971; Crespo, 1974, p. 136; Stewart et al., 1978, p. 46; Beaulieu, 1981, pp. 35, 253) that overall rates of deviancy show a marked decline for those young people who either meet graduation requirements or because they are old enough are legally free to leave school. In short, if students of legal school leaving age have “bigger fish to fry” they can go fry them; or they can decide to remain in school. Either way, and I suspect this is most importantly related to the reduced deviancy rates, their actions result from individual choice not State compulsion.

With regard to the above it should be emphasized that most of the skipping students Crespo (1974) interviewed skipped school almost by accident and not simply because they wanted to flout the law. In other words, this means that for many skippers (and probably for a sizeable percentage of early school leavers and vandals as well) the world outside the school is often so interesting they are compelled, without much

conscious preplanning, to break the strictures of the school's enforced learning environment. By skipping they act upon their own self-awareness and that of their peers that they are more bored in school than in any other social setting (Csikszentmihalyi, Larson and Prescott, 1977). They want schooling not that relates so much to the form of political and social theorizing but that is personalized to the practical content of their daily lives.<sup>18</sup> The research material reviewed here indicates that students do not often use these exact words to express their dissatisfactions with school learning, but student interviews do show that they seem to be aware of a felt need to replace their current schooling with learning which is exciting, perhaps even fun.<sup>19</sup> They do seem to want – whether they articulate it exactly this way or not – more community-related and therefore, more community-based learning experiences.<sup>20</sup>

In using the phrase “community-based learning experiences,” I have in mind what Stevens (1974, pp. 11–13) has referred to as “community education” and “community control” – the process-centred third and fourth phases of community-based learning which build upon the more passive first and second stages involving the after hours community use of school facilities and joint participation by administrators, teachers, and parents in a planning committee usually limited to “the optional phase” of community school programs. It is often a matter of necessity that activities such as recreation programs and adult education classes be scheduled to take place following day sessions of what is customarily regarded as the work week – during late afternoons, evenings, and on weekends. Whether these activities become simplistic “add-ons” which often pass for the kind of community education envisioned here but which usually help to maintain the “normal,” compulsory and formalized programs of today's K-12 schooling has very little to do with the times at which they are scheduled. Rather, it has centrally to do with the community-involved praxis which should comprise the foundation that supports these activities.

Two of the early leaders in developing community-involved education were the Flemington Road Elementary School located in the Metro Toronto Borough of North York (see Shuttleworth, 1971; Stamp, 1975, pp. 92–93) and, also opening as a community school in 1966, the Langevin Elementary-Junior High School in Calgary. In my view Langevin participants had the right idea in bringing learning and living together with their two underlying philosophies. First: “A school is for the district and it's there to be used.” Second: “A formal education is not everything” (see Stamp, 1975, p. 94).

Langevin and other community schools still retain many aspects of “the age-specific, teacher-related process requiring full-time attendance at an

obligatory curriculum" (Illich, 1972, p. 38) which Illich and others have urged us to abandon. And yet, the Langevin philosophies do offer the beginnings of a different vision of learning – points of departure for removing the legal compulsion to attend schools while at the same time encouraging us to ground them in the day-to-day life of the communities that surround them. Almost every community education writer has pointed out (e.g., see Minzey and LeTart, 1972; Stevens, 1974; Gayfer, 1976) that this grounding involves seeing community education as dynamic process rather than as a series of "finished product" activity programs added on to the "normal" school curriculum.

To distinguish between "process" and "product" (Minzcy, 1974, pp. 58–59) means that successful programs depend upon a process which ties together each community and its school facilities in ways that permit learners of all ages to develop their whole selves through flexible learning situations – situations which take into account learner background and current interests in light of the learner's community. In brief, the educational praxis envisioned herein involves movement away from the more traditional, relatively more comfortable and less threatening "banking" kind of education, which is the most common school experience, toward a more "problem-posing" education in which community interaction both generates and controls learning experiences (see Freire, 1971).

As recently as the mid-1970s, Corman (1975), in compiling her annotated bibliography on community education in Canada, found very little in the literature which indicated community control of education. Since Corman's observation, several provinces (notably British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Alberta, and Ontario) have been quite involved in attempting to develop problem-posing educational environments which move toward being more community-controlled. Eastabrook and Fullan (1978) and Gayfer (1976) have reported on some of these attempts in Ontario. Gayfer's survey of community schools is particularly important to the present analysis on two counts: (1) Her survey reconfirms the work of fellow Canadian Lind (1974) and Americans such as Goodman (in several essays) and Gittell (1970) who earlier issued calls for decentralization in decision making as the basis for a more community controlled education; and (2) Her survey makes it especially clear that this kind of decentralization is a long way from being actualized.

#### SUMMARY

The major arguments of this paper support Lind (1974) who concludes his class-based analysis of professionalism, bureaucracy, technology, tracking or streaming, ethnicity, and geography as these factors have

impinged on schooling in the Toronto area by calling for more decentralized learning environments.<sup>21</sup> In my view, we should begin to organize and develop noncompulsory, community-based, and life-long learning situations controlled at the local level by community members. In so doing we might be able to begin removing not only the worst consequences but also some of the root causes of class, racial/ethnic, gender, and age discrimination as these have become institutionalized in today's schools.

A good start to show that we are serious about this endeavour, and that we really do care about all the students from the variety of family backgrounds who come to our present public schools, would be to pay a different kind of attention to the so-called deviants. For example, showing that we really care about the emotionally crippled and bureaucratically standardized kids of the middle/professional class(es) would mean, in the community education context envisioned herein, paying much greater nonpunitive attention to the role played by a significant proportion of working-class kids who become school deviants.

In sum, it is my opinion – grounded in the research findings reviewed and the theoretical framework elaborated in this paper – that the “deviant” actions of the skippers, early school leavers, and vandals deserve a different kind of caring and serious attention than previously has been the case. Why? Because these students, in no longer wishing to subdue their emotions to authority relations that separate “truths” of the school from the reality of a world outside which shapes it and them, make a very important statement about today's schooling. They are saying that they do not need or want a learning that flows from teacher and administrative authority compelled by law but one that flows from and relates to their everyday life experiences. The beginning step to creating learning environments in accord with these needs and wants is to give up the emotionally crippling security blanket of compulsory standardization to bureaucratic routine which we know today as school.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to the three anonymous reviewers whose comments were so helpful in strengthening this manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Reporter Budgen (1981) makes a point of mentioning that Kitsilano is “the largest night school west of Toronto” and thus, it is almost certain that “some of this vandalism was committed by adults” (p. 18).

<sup>3</sup> For a similar earlier finding from the United States and a fuller treatment of the connections between SES (socioeconomic status) and delinquency, see Nye, Short and Olson (1958).

<sup>4</sup> For documentation as to the extent of, and the tremendous increase in school absenteeism in the United States, see Birman and Natriello (1980, especially pp. 168–169).

- <sup>5</sup> The process whereby such consciousness is developed is discussed by the originator of this phrase Giddings (1901, pp. 59–60, 91–102, 257–274). In another place I have outlined some of my criticisms of Giddings' work and the work of some other early American sociologists as well, see Nelsen (1975, pp. 141–151).
- <sup>6</sup> For an updated view in collaboration with Cressey, see Sutherland and Cressey (1978, especially p. 249).
- <sup>7</sup> Disturbing to me, and perhaps related to this research emphasizing the pervasiveness of school boredom, is the current college and university craze for television soap operas. I would not venture to judge whether the dedicated soap watchers are bored with the rest of their lives, but it is true that a growing percentage of today's university students in North America are giving "the soaps" top priority – organizing their class and social schedules and in some cases their post-graduate work lives (with the help of a Betamax) around these television dramas. For documentation see Birnbach (1981).
- <sup>8</sup> In addition to McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, I also direct the reader to his collaboration with Fiore (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967) where his "medium is the message" thesis is expanded to show how the medium is also "the massage."
- <sup>9</sup> Of course, for the original ideal type that forms the basis for Blau's discussion of these characteristics of bureaucracy one should review Max Weber's work in Gerth and Mills (1946) and Weber (1925 and 1947).
- <sup>10</sup> My comments below are limited by the limitations resulting from Willis' all male sample and his failure to be specific enough about the oppression of working-class girls in the counter-school culture he analyzes. Willis has provided a brief response to these and other problems discussed in McRobbie's (1980) feminist critique within the larger context of a reply to several other *Learning To Labour* critics (Willis, 1981, pp. 48–67, especially pp. 62, 67). This reply is important because in sorting out supposedly similar notions of Reproduction Willis distinguishes among cultural production, cultural and social reproduction and Reproduction in such a way as to clarify his book's contribution to educational theory.
- <sup>11</sup> It should be pointed out here that Willis (1977, especially pp. 110–113) also notes some significant differences between school and work and discusses the ways in which working-class youth are affected by them.
- <sup>12</sup> In addition to these connections having been made by Beaulieu (1981, pp. 250–251), I also would like to draw the reader's attention to the several citations in Kulka et al. (1980, pp. 49–60, especially p. 57).
- <sup>13</sup> This analogy between schools and jails, while admittedly an exaggerated comparison in order to emphasize the point about their similarities, is not as far-fetched as one might initially think. Students themselves regularly refer to the jail-like atmosphere of schools and compare them to prisons. For an example of this view of school as reflected in student statements, see Anderson and Ridley (1978, pp. 147–148).
- <sup>14</sup> For further information regarding this matter of student inability to "adjust" to the school's behavioural expectations and the resultant consequences for students, see Parmer (1960) and White (1966).
- <sup>15</sup> Regarding this point, it is true that the law, at least in Ontario, provides for children to be educated at home or otherwise outside the network of both accredited public and private schools. However, only a *very* small percentage (a relative handful) of children are born to parents who have enough formal education, financial privilege, and/or free time that they can restructure reality so as to take advantage of these legal alternatives to compulsory schooling.
- <sup>16</sup> A careful reading of Illich's (1972) Chapter 6, "Learning Webs" (pp. 103–150), makes it clear to me that Illich's deschooled proposals for restructuring learning, if implemented, would serve to increase (rather than to decrease as I think he desires) the power and

control of the governing-class multi-national corporations. It is these corporations which in the past have shaped and currently are shaping and maintaining the inhumane, debilitating arrangements of the prevailing socio-economic order.

<sup>17</sup> Richardson (1980) draws heavily upon the work of Tyack (1976) in analyzing the structural position of American teachers relative to the growth of nineteenth-century public education to argue that public school teachers constitute "the essential link to implementation of compulsory school attendance" (p. 159).

<sup>18</sup> For elaboration on the contradictions we need to overcome because schools socialize us to polarize form and content, theory and practice, and political and personal matters, see Harding (1978, especially pp. 287–289).

<sup>19</sup> The need for enjoyment (perhaps even fun) in learning was popularized some years ago by Leonard (1968). More recent social-psychological studies germane to this point emphasize the interconnections between enjoyment (presence of the "flow" experience) and reducing violence. This research has been thoughtfully reviewed and placed within the school context by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1980).

<sup>20</sup> This statement seems to hold true at every level of schooling – note the continued and keen interest in "field trips" among both elementary and secondary students as well as the growing popularity of work-study experiences and programs for secondary and post-secondary students. In the university lecture hall I have observed that students seem to be most attentive when community experts are brought in to talk about their ongoing everyday involvements (their work). Courses organized upon this principle of community-based praxis are ensured, at least at my university, of relatively heavy enrollment.

For an excellent description of what I mean by "community" based upon an insightful analytic distinction between "communities" and "networks," see Slater (1975, especially pp. 15–18).

<sup>21</sup> Levin (1975) has forcefully stated the major advantages to minority Americans of these more decentralized, community-controlled learning environments.

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Die Schulausbildung ist eine Sozialisierung, die Gefühle standardisiert und oft auch ausschließt, um sich der bürokratischen Routine der korporativen Arbeitsplätze anzupassen. Schüler-“Abweicher”, die sich gegen diese Standardisierung sträuben, indem sie öffentlich ihre Langeweile im Schulsystem kundtun, müssen die Versuche der “Bohörden” – sie zu zwingen, sich einer Schulrealität anzupassen, die nach der sozialökonomischen Vorstellung der Mehrheit geformt und erhalten wird – überstehen. Es wird diskutiert, daß (1) das Benehmen dieser Abweicher als die offensichtlichste Spitze eines Schuleisberges, der mit Gleichgültigkeit und Feindseligkeit gefüllt ist, ernst genommen werden sollte und (2) der erste Schritt, diese Situation zu ändern, darin liegt, die Schulen als nicht-obligatorisch und mehr gemeinschaftsbasierte Institutionen neu zu konstruieren.

La escolaridad es una socialización que normaliza, y muchas veces elimina, las emociones, para conformar a la rutina burocrática de los ambientes de trabajo de las compañías. Los estudiantes que se “desvían” y resisten esta estandarización al hacer público su aburrimiento con la escuela, deben hacer frente a las “autoridades” que tratan de forzarlos a “someterse” a la realidad escolar, formada y mantenida según la imagen socio-económica de la cultura en cuyo seno se encuentra. Se arguye que (1) las acciones de estos estudiantes que no se conforman deben considerarse graves ya que constituyen la indicación de una situación enraizada de apatía y hostilidad; y (2) el primer paso para cambiar esta situación es reorganizar las escuelas en instituciones no obligatorias y más enraizadas en la comunidad.

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Randle W. Nelsen is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology, Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario P7B 5E1.