Aspirations and Expectations of High School Youth

AN ACTION-RESEARCH PROJECT IN A WORKERS' AREA*

STEWART CRYSDALE

York University, Toronto, Canada

Young people’s educational careers are fateful for their future occupations, earnings, social status, and place in society. Yet approximately two-thirds of youth out of school in Riverdale, an Anglo-Saxon, working-class, downtown area of Toronto, have not completed any educational program, not even a two-year program in vocational or commercial school. A high drop-out rate seems to be widespread in downtown areas of Canadian cities. This helps to perpetuate the poverty cycle which grips succeeding generations of approximately one-quarter of Canadian families¹ (Economic Council of Canada 1968; Litwak 1965).

Two decades ago several United States studies indicated that working-class parents held values which did not encourage their children to complete high school or to aspire to higher level jobs than they themselves had reached (Chinoy 1952; Hollingshead 1949; Galler 1951; Hyman 1953). The Riverdale data throw doubt on the adequacy and validity of attempts to explain school non-completion on the basis of class values. Rather, our data suggest that high drop-out rates among many young people in working-class districts of metropolitan areas may indicate discrepancies between rising aspirations and the processes in schools, industry and community by which students are screened

* Based partly on a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Sociology and Anthropology, June, 1971, at St. John’s, Newfoundland. Research on social mobility in Riverdale, a working-class area of downtown Toronto, from 1966 onwards, known since 1969 as the Riverdale Youth Project, has been generously supported by grants from the Canadian Council on Urban and Regional Research, the Canada Departments of Manpower and Immigration, and Health and Welfare, the City of Toronto, the Ontario Departments of Labour and Education, the Economic Council of Ontario, the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, and a number of employers. The author acknowledges gratefully the collaboration of Harry MacKay, Project Co-ordinator, in every phase of the program and research.

¹ The Economic Council of Canada, in its Fifth Annual Review, estimated that some 27% of the non-farm population of Canada in 1961 were living below the poverty level, so defined when 70% or more of family income is used for food, clothing, and shelter. (1968, 108–109). For references to high drop-out rates in low-income areas of the United States, see E. Litwak (1965, 305ff.)
for various social destinations (Turner 1964; Empey 1956; Han 1968; Scan-
zonii 1967; Sewell and Armer 1966; Sewell and Shah 1968; Sewell, Haller and
Portes 1969; Sewell and Ohlendorf 1970; Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963; Kohl
1968; and such Canadian studies as Pavalko and Bishop 1966; Hall and Mac-
Farlane 1962; Crysdaile 1968).

Three sorts of questions arise, each with implications for policy as well as
for theories in the sociology of education and of community change. First, are
there, in fact, class orientations in students’ views on education and in their
aspirations and expectations for careers? Second, should variations by class be
found in actual expectations, do these represent value orientations or are they
consequences of institutionalized inequality of opportunity? (Breton 1970,
1972; Breton and McDonald 1971; Harvey 1970; Lawlor 1970; Hall and Mac-
And third, what criteria are used by schools, employers, and community groups
in transitional procedures for the selective advancement of students in educa-
tion, work, and community circles, and how do these criteria articulate with
prevailing values, particularly, equal opportunity for social advancement?

Research Design

This paper presents some preliminary findings of the Riverdale Youth
Project after two years of basic mobility studies among chief wage-earners and
another three years of action-research among secondary school students. This
is a continuing, community-based, action-research project to enquire into the
broad questions discussed above. Results reported here have to do mainly
with the first question – aspirations, expectations, views on education, dis-
btribution by curriculum, and grade standing. The project has several unusual
features.

(a) It is based on extensive enquiry into social and occupational mobility
among a probability sample of 304 chief wage-earners who live in the same
three census tracts from which the youth sample is taken (Crysdaile 1968).

(b) It has an experimental design, in which the sample of 313 students,
drawn from graduates of one senior elementary school over a three-year period,
was divided into two parts – the action group of 159 students and the control
group of 154 students. These groups were matched approximately by sex,
ethnicity, and by score on an eleven-item mobility potential scale. A five-fold
intervention program was conducted for three years among members of the
action sub-sample to help them identify and contend with problems of school
completion and job beginning. The control group took normal chances without
help from the project. All 313 students were interviewed at the outset of the
three year program and again at its close. Subsequent reports will analyse the
relative effects of such factors as social situation, values, attitudes, relationships,
psycho-social adjustment, and school performance in shaping students’ pros-
psects for careers in adulthood. Later reports will also deal with the effects of
the action program (MacKay 1973).