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Drugs – the Educator’s Viewpoint*

He is perhaps being overly simplistic who suggests that drug dependent students have become so because of pressures of school work, the heavy schedule of extra-curricular activities and the meritocracy-based educational system. Once more the educational horse is flogged and the reasons are not altogether clear.

The fact is that in the realm of human affairs there are no simple answers. So many influences in a multivariable environment are brought to bear on the individual from the time he is born that careful analysis has to be made of these influences before any dictum can be pronounced. Thus while it may be true to say that the various school pressures have been known to constitute a contributory factor to delinquency, to suggest that they are so in every case or that they are the sole cause of delinquency would be incorrect. It is important to avoid the popular and facile explanation arrived at by laying blame squarely at the school door in order not to preclude the identification of other relevant and important factors associated with it.

Whatever the form of delinquency – and drug addiction is merely one aspect of it, there are always the concomitant pre-disposing conditions based in the socio-economic environment of the individual. These produce a chain of reaction of cause and effect, which in the case of the individual who loses control of the situation, leads to social deviance expressed through thefts, gangsterism, drug-taking, affectations in apparel and personal appearance, suicide and the like. Thus the last mentioned are actually symptomatic of underlying root causes which need to be investigated.

In the incidence of drug-taking both in the West and East, certain common ones of such root causes may be traced. The first of these is the lack of a sense of community feeling and neighbourliness or belongingness, arising either through the inadequate provision of amenities for proper social living or through disenchantment with the prevailing social mores.

In a local study made by a team of three investigators¹ in connection with drug abuse in a certain housing estate the authors reported a statement

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made by one of the youth: "It (the estate) has many people, a population of 170,000, but it has no community". In a close-up of the hippie scene in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, author von Hoffman refers to drug-abuse thus²:

"Dope was associated with ideas which have no necessary connection with the dope business: the sharing, the search for community, the looking for an alternative way of life, the love and flower-power themes..."

Further on, he says:

"The expression of anger with affection – 'love through clenched teeth' somebody has called it – was taken up by kids who had no political interests but who seemed to have a lot of difficulty articulating hostility to parents, teachers or anyone. These middle class youngsters found a way of letting out their angry emotions - they could say it with flowers. Coincidentally, it happens that these passive-aggressive types, suffering from emotional constipation, are especially attracted to psychedelic chemicals."

In Singapore, there is little yet to indicate any association of drug-addiction with pure hostility against persons or with intellectual disenchantment over prevailing social mores. The evidence is stronger in favour of socio-economic causes. In the study referred to above, more than half (51) of a sample of 93 youths interviewed lived in 1-room dwelling units. Judging from the sample, the poorer they come, the more prone they are to anti-social behaviour. However, youths living in 3-room flats formed the second largest group (26) and the proportion indicated a "significantly high level of mal-adjustment" in the community which appeared to be due to family conflicts and the inability to adjust to a new social environment in cases where homes had been moved.

With lack of community feeling can be traced a strong peer-group influence which provided a sense of belongingness and togetherness. Thus, all 93 youths in the local study admitted to strong peer-group ties. They had leaders just as in any other organisation, most of them (about two thirds) were unemployed and this seemed to have some correlation with the low level of educational attainment of the sample since 52 out of

¹ Vasoo S., Ngiam T.L. and Lai L.T., "Report on the Action Programme on Youths involved in Drug Abuse in Toa Payoh Housing Estate", mimeograph. This may be an atypical sample, but the study does offer some insights.

² Von Hoffman N., We are the people our parents warned us against, a Fawcett Crest paperback, New York, 1968, pp. 38 & 39.

93 had only a primary school education. The high incidence of unemployment was certainly not indicative of lack of jobs but pointed rather to a low self-image and poor working habits.

A demographic look at the sample is also revealing. 48 were between the ages of 12-16, while 40 were between 17-21 years. They were, therefore, mainly young adolescents under 21 years of age.

Incidentally, those sporting long hair among this group of youths comprised but a very minor group – 15 out of 93 to be exact. Thus not all drug-takers necessarily adopt strange apparel or sport particular hair-styles. Much depends on the gang leader and the sort of identity symbols which various subgroups choose for themselves.

One other point arising out of the study is worth noting. Drug-taking seemed to be more common among Malays than Chinese or Indians in the sample. But this in no way suggests that deviant behaviour is more characteristic of one race than another. Rather, the point to be noted is that one racial subgroup has a stronger tendency to the expression of deviancy through drug-abuse which another is more particularly involved in such other forms of anti-social activities as *"gangsterism, incidental theft gangs as well as organised crimes"*³.

Here the inherent and characteristic racial attitudes to achievement may account for the significant difference in choice of activity. Where achievement motivation is low, drug-taking offers escapism from failure and a low social acceptance status. Where achievement motivation is characteristically high, proof of being able to achieve has to be demonstrated through violence, illegal acquisitions and the like.

The long preamble I have made is to show how much social-economic factors other than the educational do play a part in fostering deviant behaviour. In another local study on "Academic Achievement, School Adjustment and Delinquency Proneness in a Housing Estate School"⁴, it was pointed out that

"As neighbourhood satisfaction increases, the proportions in the 'high proneness' line decrease... the variation is more pronounced in

³ Vasoo et al, Op. cit. Footnote on page 9 explained that one particular group of Chinese boys contacted at the beginning of their study was broken up as a result of some of them having been arrested for armed robbery.

⁴ Miao Samuel and Kong Bernard, Academic Achievement, School Adjustment and Delinquency Proneness in a Housing Estate School, unpublished academic exercise submitted for the degree of B.Soc.Sc, University of Singapore, 1971.

the English stream... Perhaps in his social mal-adjustment, the delinquent prone student has a tendency to be more dissatisfied with the facilities and conditions of his home environs than the non-delinquent student, regardless of the actual conditions."

But when all's said, school achievement does enter as a factor in the composite whole, sometimes as cause, at other times as effect. In this second study, the authors continued by drawing attention to the fact that low academic performance of their sample could generally be attributed to factors which were prevalent in the housing estate: frequent noise interruption, low occupation of main wage-earner, low family income, low parental education, large family size and little extra-school assistance. Also within each stream, high delinquency proneness and low school adjustment were found to be strongly correlated, but the direction of causation seemed to go both ways. Another important point made was that the background variables, that is, environmental ones, seemed to affect academic performance more than educational variables, while the reverse hold true for delinquency proneness. In other words, where delinquency proneness was potentially evident, the presence of negative educational influences could precipitate delinquent behaviour.

To return then to our first question: is it true from reports in the press that students who become drug dependents have become so because of pressures of school work, the heavy schedule of extra-curricular activities and the meritocracy-based educational system? The answer rests in the following facts:

1. The child who resorts to drug abuse or any other form of delinquent behaviour has been already predisposed to such behaviour through his experience with certain adverse environmental conditions.
2. He is the type who is commonly possessed of a low self-image and perceives himself as unable to achieve normal status in the wider community. He is thus alien to the community in which he conducts his activities.
3. In a search for identity, he finds strength in peer group approval. Members of the peer group are normally those who harbour similar feelings of rejection by the wider community.
4. For such a child, pressures in school can easily become the proverbial last straw which breaks the camel's back. They can precipitate delinquent behaviour. They do not constitute the cause of delinquent behaviour.

Such being the set of circumstances, something has to be done to alleviate pressures on students in school. But this alone is not enough if the predisposing conditions are not ameliorated.

Indeed, in so far as Singapore is concerned, so-called pressures stem from 3 sources: first, an increasingly competitive struggle in the job world owing to rapid technological progress which requires better and better skills; those who cannot make it, drop out. In the first study mentioned above, some of the youths namely 5 out of 93 were over the age of 21. All 93 had difficulty in acquiring jobs. The few employed, worked only as seasonal employees on a daily-rated basis at construction sites, hawkers' stalls and various other menial duties. The cards are stacked heavily against the disadvantaged. He begins poorly in the academic attainment; he then drops out of school and eventually out of the job market and of society.

A second source of pressure is parental. In a study on adolescent problems in Singapore⁵, it was clear that in a great majority of cases of the sample investigation, parental expectations were not realistic with respect to their children's scholastic ability. Furthermore, it was revealed through data that children felt that there were certain types of problems such as their loves or their failures about which they could not confide in their parents for fear of parental displeasure. Some had a strong anxiety syndrome.

Parents in Singapore have rather set ideas about how things should be done. There are those who even demand that their children be given homework. While the latter may be necessary sometimes, it is not necessarily always pertinent. Work for the child to take home must be consistent both with the child's interests and the general objectives of learning.

The third source of pressure is, of course, the school. The burden of school work may be due again to several variable – poor teaching styles which demand cramming and note-rote learning; poor teachers who cannot maintain interest and who try to induce so-called learning through fear – fear of punishment, fear for examination failure, fear of adverse reports to parents. We have only to recall the recent criticism about the removal of the history and geography papers from the PSLE examinations to appreciate how deeply ingrained certain ideas are in the minds of teachers and parents. To many of them the removal of the examination is the removal of the only constraint they have in the child to learn. They do not perceive that subjects are not doomed with the removal of the examination. In fact, they can be better taught. Also it is not realised that

⁵ Wong H.K., Problems of Adolescents in Singapore, mimeograph, restricted circulation, Research Unit, Ministry of Education, Singapore, 1970.

evaluation of progress at school is not solely achieved through the examination, there are other forms of evaluation such as frequent assessments through short exercises, special projects and interview ratings.

The child who is compelled to work merely through fear can never be a willing worker or, if he does work, develops a lip-service attitude to work which only produces when the stick is around. I am not recommending that we should not have standards and firm expectations. I am criticising the methods which purport to achieve these but in reality defeat them.

In so far as the Ministry is concerned, every effort is being made to alleviate the burden of work. There are limits set on the number of extramural activities in which pupils may engage. As our population increase stabilises over the years it may logically be expected that the problems created by quantitative pressures and rapid expansion of the system – problems resulting in such pressures as large classes, crowded class rooms, poor teacher-pupil relationships, uneven attention, lack of guidance for individuals – will be resolved through a gradual return to smaller classes and, where resources permit, even to the improvement of school facilities as the provision of more recreational space, provision of counselling services, more involvement of school pupils as persons rather than as anonymous units in a mass movement up the educational scale.

The family used to be a strong force for cohesion. How many parents now have time for their children? How many talks to their children or share with them the problems of growth? Or are teachers also expected to be parents?

I think if any correction has to be made, all should be involved and should cooperate – the community, the religious institutions, the home, the school and the child. The situation should change from one of mutual distrust to that of mutual understanding and cooperation.

In the action research which followed the initial study on youth involved in drug abuse, Vasoo and his colleagues found that it was possible to win the confidence of the group once the gang leader was identified and won over. The process of change did not follow on punitive action or even pure counselling. It started only when the youths were involved in positive activities in which those who sought to win them also participated. It was reported to me that on one occasion when a football game was arranged between these youths and the University team, members of this team voluntarily went for a haircut. When asked why they did this, their reply was that it was not dignified to go with long hair. The fact that they were accepted changed their self-image: they left off drug-taking quite willingly.

This shows how important it is to help restore feelings of self-respect, community and security in circumstances where the individual has lost grip of realistic goals.

While community centres do exist in Singapore, it is not clear to what extent they have helped to give youth a sense of community through their activities or to what extent they have reached out to those on the skid. It is also not clear to what extent parents look on the community centres as places for socialisation, where they and their children can find recreational activities together. In so far as schools are concerned, alertness to the problems of children under the care of teachers bears positive returns and, if teachers and parents will work together to help problem children, much more will be accomplished.

There is one other aspect of drug-taking which has not been mentioned hitherto in this paper. This has to do with the greed of those whose business is to sell drugs – not the insignificant dope-pedlar who has to sell because he is hung on drugs himself and has to find the wherewithal to satisfy the craving stirred up in him, but the big-time, scrupulous manipulator. Here the school health education course can include teaching on the dangers of drugs and on the way in which the careless can be drawn into bondage. The whole community too has to be alive to the more sinister intentions of dope-peddling and should help to arrest activities which promote the destruction of others for the profit of a few. Parents, instead of lecturing their children caught drug-taking, may do better to gain their confidence first and find out the source of supply. In many cases, young children smoke a reefer or take a snort of pot through pure curiosity or on a dare, without the least thought even of deviancy. The victim of unscrupulous manipulation always needs help. We would all do well to remember this.