Spotlight

Experience-Based Career Education
A Prevention Model
for Delinquency Prevention

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While our current technologies of prevention do not generally address basic economic issues, some do focus on fundamental problems caused by practices of major institutions such as schools and, in my view, such efforts hold the greatest promise for the 1980's. This issue's Spotlight program provides an example of the prevention potential which may be important in the coming decade. The program is Experienced-Based Career Education (EBCE) in junior and senior high schools. EBCE is not commonly viewed as a prevention program. Its major goal is the provision of career awareness and experience to youths who may seek employment upon leaving school. Yet, I see it as a promising program from both survival and delinquency prevention perspectives. Why?

We know from delinquency research that attachment to school, commitment to educational pursuits, and high aspirations for legitimate employment following school are elements of a bond to society which prevent delinquency (Hirschi, 1969; Hindelang, 1973). As budget tightening and the back-to-basics philosophy sweep away frills in schools, students who have not experienced academic success in traditional classes will find less in school to like. They may also perceive fewer opportunities for success through pursuing educational goals. At the same time more traditional curricula and teaching methods and larger schools with more students per class are likely to be accompanied by increased school crime and student delinquency (Gottfredson and Daiger, 1979; National Institute of Education, 1978). These problems will be exacerbated as tight job markets and poor job prospects for young people make the options outside of school even more bleak for the noncollege bound, whether dropouts or high school graduates. Youth unemployment is likely to increase and youth crime is likely to increase with it (Levenson, 1976; Brenner, 1978; Fleisher, 1966; Phillips et al., 1972; Singell, 1967). In this context, a key to preventing youth crime will be to find ways to combine development of basic academic skills with educational approaches which increase the likelihood that students will like school, develop commitments to educational goals, and develop aspirations for legitimate occupation roles which they can expect to attain.

EBCE appears to hold promise in this respect. EBCE is an educational model in which students gain both work experience and academic credit as they explore job sites and complete individually prescribed learning activities.
EBCE is designed to be integrated into the traditional high school curriculum. Its central characteristics are: (1) use of community work sites for student learning experiences; (2) an individually-focused curriculum based on students’ career and academic needs; (3) integration of academic learning with career learning; and (4) preparation of both college-bound and vocationally-oriented youths for adult roles and responsibilities.

Students may participate in EBCE for up to two years. Teachers coordinate student learning and help students select community business, industrial, labor, cultural, professional, or public sector work places as learning resources. Students spend part of their school time in school and part at the chosen site. They may explore up to 15 field learning sites during the academic year. After an exploration phase, students may choose to continue at a particular site for an in-depth skill building internship of three to six weeks.

EBCE includes three curriculum areas: life/survival skills, basic skills, and career development. A student can satisfy the requirements for a traditional high school diploma by completing a program including all of these areas. “Life/survival skills” content includes affective skills training and practical training about credit, insurance, income taxes, the electoral process, real estate, family responsibilities, and budgeting. The “basic skills” content focuses on the acquisition of reading, mathematics, writing, listening, and communication skills essential to performing required tasks both in the program and in adulthood. “Career development” consists of career counseling and actual job experiences.

A major question likely to be raised is whether students who receive a career expiration education of this type develop the basic academic skills which schools should be teaching. Experimental research at Tigard High School in Oregon found no significant differences in gains in reading, math, or study skills between students who participated in EBCE and students who participated in more traditional classes. EBCE students made significant gains in reading comprehension and arithmetic concepts and applications. Thus, EBCE appears to be a valid way to teach basic academic skills. The additional strengths of the approach are observable in other evaluation results. EBCE students scored significantly higher than nonparticipating control students in knowledge regarding the world of work, self-confidence in their ability to complete the necessary steps for entering a career of their choice, use of public resources such as public libraries, and perceived effectiveness and relevance of their educational experiences. They appear to have become more realistic in their concept of work and more critical in assessing their personal work habits than nonparticipants.

Unfortunately, caution must be exercised in interpreting and generalizing these results because of very high rates of attrition from the control group. Of 45 students selected for the control group at Tigard High School, only 12 were at school and available for post-testing at the end of the year. Seventeen of the control students dropped out of the school prior to pre-testing. In contrast, 30 of the 31 students randomly assigned to the EBCE program were available for post-testing. These attrition statistics themselves may indicate EBCE’s potential for maintaining student interest and attachment to school.