A COHORT STUDY OF SCHOOL WITHDRAWALS WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH

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The epidemiological-public health approach is applied to an investigation of school withdrawals from a rural Florida county school system. Operating on the premise that school withdrawals constitute a risk group from a mental health viewpoint, five specific withdrawal groups are identified, and time points at which withdrawal is most likely to occur are located. On the basis of certain background information, it was possible to predict in advance students who were most apt to withdraw and the form the withdrawal would take. Implications for program planning are discussed.

Although school withdrawal, considered broadly, has not received much attention from public health-mental health professionals, its relevance to school mental health is strongly suggested in the various studies which deal in a more narrow way with specific modes of withdrawal. Studies of school dropouts have indicated a relationship between the dropout problem and community problems such as poverty, unemployment, and juvenile delinquency (Sofokidis and Sullivan, 1964; Schreiber, 1963). Studies of mobility have shown an association between mobility and psychiatric disorders, suggesting that withdrawal in the form of migration presents many children with unique kinds of pressures and problems to which they must adjust (Kantor, 1965; Murphy, 1963; Wilson, Sauer, and Lachenbruch, 1965). Academic retardation, though not usually regarded as withdrawal, is in fact a special form of withdrawal when the retained student is viewed as having withdrawn from his class to begin again with a new group. Research related to retention indicates that it contributes to social and personal maladjustment, and does not facilitate academic achievement (Krugman and Krugman, 1946; Goodlad and Anderson, 1959; Morris, 1960).

Graduation as a form of withdrawal has not received much attention from a mental health viewpoint, perhaps because it is a successful mode of exit and mental health practitioners are still largely preoccupied with maladaptive, nonsuccessful forms of behavior. However, its relevance as a transition state, or as a critical event in the normal course of living, has been pointed out by mental health authorities (Murphey, Silber, Coelho, Hamburg, and Greenberg, 1963; Silber, Hamburg, Coelho, Murphey, Rosenberg, and Pearl, 1961).

A common theme running through all of these studies is that the removal of a student from his class or cohort, regardless of the reason, is a stressful or potentially stressful experience and, therefore, has important mental health consequences. It suggests the need for more comprehensive studies of withdrawal wherein all modes of withdrawal can be considered and examined. It also suggests the need for the development of specific interventions directed at the problems of withdrawal which can be employed and evaluated.

This paper reports a brief background study of the extent of, and reasons for, the withdrawal of students in a given generation or cohort, from a predominantly rural county school system in northwest Florida. Its purpose is to explore the program implications of different modes of with-

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Subjects

The population studied consisted of all white students who were at one time or another members of the class which began first grade in 1946 and graduated in 1958. Their school records were studied to determine the source and number who entered the class after the first grade, the number who graduated, and the outcome of those who did not graduate. An exhaustive search of the records was made in an effort to find the type of disposition made on each student, so that all students could be followed. No effort was made to follow a student once a final disposition was determined.

The data in all white schools in the county were analyzed as a group. Since an important consideration of the study was to determine the feasibility of utilizing readily available records and materials, only official school documents were used; no interviews were conducted and no statements of pupils or school officials were sought.

Total population of the cohort consisted of 646 students; of these, 281 were enrolled in the first grade at the start of the study in 1946-47; the remainder, 365 students, joined the class at various points between the first and twelfth grades through such means as in-migration and failures from other grades.

Method

Since school systems use a withdrawal code to designate the form of withdrawal on the cumulative record card of each student who leaves the system, the identification of student withdrawals was a straightforward and relatively simple counting procedure. The entire population of students who were enrolled in the first grade in 1946-47 plus those who joined this cohort later, were followed over a 12 year period. Each time a withdrawal was recorded on the record card, it was noted and recorded on a tally sheet. In this manner we were able to account for the outcome of all but 130 students. This latter group simply disappeared in the records. Usually the disappearance occurred between the end of the second semester of one year and the beginning of the first semester of the following year. No withdrawal or other disposition could be found in the records, yet the student was no longer in the system. It is strongly suspected that most of these students either moved out of the county during the summer months without notifying school authorities, or in the case of those students 16 years and over, dropped out of school. When this occurred there was no school record of the withdrawal. These 130 students are classified in this report as “indeterminates.”

Results

The cohort divides itself into five major withdrawal groups: those who graduated, those who moved from the county, those who failed and thus entered another class, those who dropped out, and those whose dispositions could not be determined from the records, i.e., “indeterminates.”

As Table 1 shows, only a fourth of the cohort succeeded in graduating from this system at the expected time. This means that 75% of the students who were at one time members of this graduating class, withdrew prior to graduation. Although school dropouts accounted for less than 7% of all withdrawals, in actuality this number should be considered as minimal since there are no records of dropouts 16 years of age and over who leave at the end of a spring semester and just do not return the following year.

Sex differences among the five withdrawal groups were outstanding only in the retained group and the dropout group. Sixty-five per cent of the retained students were boys, and 62% of the dropout group were boys. Differences between the other groups were quite small.

Locating Significant Time Points

Having identified several subpopulations of withdrawals, each of which might be considered risk groups from a mental health-public health viewpoint, the next task is to determine when in the course of a student’s career withdrawal is likely to occur. To explore this, we looked at the grade and age at which specific forms of withdrawal took place. The following picture emerged:

Graduation. Withdrawal in the form of graduation occurred, as might be expected,