



Joven y Alumno: ¿Conflicto de Identidad? Un estudio etnográfico en los liceos de sectores populares. Ana María Cerda, Jenny Assael, Florencio Ceballos, and Rodrigo Sepúlveda. Santiago, Chile: LOM Publishing House, 2000. 152 pp.

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This book is based on a collaborative study by four Chilean researchers completed over a two-year period in two public high schools in Santiago. The schools serve low-income urban adolescents. The book paints a vivid picture of Chilean teens and their schooling, provides thoughtful commentary on their experiences, and supplements these well-conceived notions with a detailed appendix explaining the ethnographic methodology employed.

For me, this is an important book because it is one of the first to use ethnography to describe adolescent identity and cultural ethos in the Southern Cone (Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay). To facilitate the understanding and comparative value of the Chilean adolescents' concerns, I group the results into four broad categories: (1) gender-related issues, (2) student activism, (3) students' feelings about the school, and (4) students' relations with the school personnel (custodians, aides, professors, and administrators).

Gender-Related Issues

Gender is the basis of group formation for these adolescents. For boys, group identification is very important. Graffiti as well as scratching metal and wood surfaces are seen as age-appropriate cultural manifestations of this identity. However, the groups are not violent and cannot be considered "gangs" in the U.S. sense. Girls do not appear to engage in graffiti writing.

Boys consider girls "not bright enough" to associate with. Girls consider school-age boys too immature to date but fine to dance with. Girls are successful in using language to stop certain boys' behaviors that annoy them. Boys play rough games among themselves, whereas girls engage in nurturing relationships (e.g., grooming activities). Girls and boys are heavy users of tobacco in and out the school. In addition, boys also use alcohol, marijuana, and hard drugs inside the school.

Girls who become pregnant are not allowed to wear the school uniform. When pregnancies become too obvious, as illustrated in the case concerning a female



principal, girls are screamed at and expelled from school. This has changed since the time the book was published, and starting around July 2000 pregnant girls cannot be expelled from public schools.

Student Activism

Many students are activists in their educational institutions, for example, organizing school-wide strikes and/or "negotiating" with internal and external bureaucracies to solve a variety of issues affecting their schools. This covers topics ranging from having the bathrooms cleaned (not successful yet) to lifting individual student suspensions (very successful). Official "student representatives" also seek resolutions to academic issues such as negotiating with their city's town hall and their parents' association to obtain needed technology (computers, radio equipment). However, when student organizations are successful as change agents, the school staff helps elect students perceived as being more malleable to adult manipulation.

Students seen by fellow students as effective and trusted leaders are not necessarily academically "good students." Students claim that those without good grades are very attuned to the concerns and needs of the student body.

Students also mobilize to organize numerous dances outside as well as inside the school. Dances include food and drink (also alcohol). Drunken behavior does not appear as a problem in the narrative. My own experiences corroborate that alcohol is usually considered appropriate in a party situation and is not hidden from adults.

Students' Feelings about the School

Students express the need to obtain a school diploma, which they consider valuable in their job search. Students support the use of school uniforms because some of their friends do not have money to buy a variety of dress clothes. Students would like to be proud of their school, but they think that adults do not care enough to improve the schools' image.

Students' Relations with the School Personnel

Students would like to see "consistency" in adult behavior (e.g., rules are not applied consistently or are changed). For them, inconsistency in adult behavior encourages them to be hypocrites and to lie. They appear upset that being truthful is not helpful in their dealings with school personnel. Students in the school where they have better



relations with the adults are *less* independent and do not accomplish so much "democratically" as in the school where adults do not seem to care.

Students believe that adults are scared of them and that they cannot or would not understand their point of view. Students generally state that they do not like to study, but they favor strict and "fair" professors and/or professors who talk about "real life issues" (such as advising them on how to obtain jobs after graduation).

Adults often verbally abuse students. The abuses are always public, and the most feared are humiliations. Humiliations are at the root for students' lack of classroom participation. Students try to become "invisible" so that adults will not point them out or ascribe to them psychological characteristics such as "being slow." Because of the assumption that very poor students live among "criminals," students do not want adults to associate them with anyone from an extremely poor neighborhood (where houses are made of cardboard on public land). Teens imitate adults and humiliate kids poorer than them. Therefore, students spend a lot of time discussing their home areas as "safe" and "without problems." Another result of this insult is that students need to form groups in order to be/feel protected from fellow students and adults.

The researchers claim a direct correlation between the prevalent verbal abuse and the lack of student self-esteem. Lack of self-esteem correlates with lack of interest in the school and the dropout rate. In support of the professors we must be aware that they teach a minimum of 45 students per class with hardly any support materials. In addition, the professors' pay is so low that they have several different jobs in order to make ends meet.

In these high schools, as well as in some in the United States, the miseducation of our children cannot be corrected simply by adding academic training for their professors and/or by including a religious component to the children's education. It appears to me that respect for the "other" is still in short supply in our global community and is totally lacking for economically deprived people. Could it be that we are all "afraid of the poor," as Mother Theresa stated?

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