

ALIENATION IN SCHOOL LIFE: A WORKING PAPER

Introduction

The concept of alienation has a respectable history beginning at least as far back as the writings of the 19th Century German philosopher Hegel. In recent years it has been applied to virtually all social situations and their members are from society-at-large, down to basic social units such as the family. As a construct, alienation has been analyzed and utilized in literary circles, sociology, political science, psychology, philosophy and education.

My purpose in this essay is to help the reader investigate the concept of alienation, and, possibly, the fact of alienation as it may occur within the reader's own life or within the classroom or school where the reader works. This investigation is triggered by the following questions:

1. "Alienation" fact or fiction in school life?
2. How is alienation manifested, if indeed it is?
3. If alienation is manifested in school life, is it a positive or negative factor in pupil learning and development?
4. How can (should) teachers regard (and respond to) alienation in school life?

In this paper I am not attempting to present a pre-determined diagnosis of alienation and its "solution". Rather, I am introducing the concept of alienation and am suggesting guidelines for investigating and discussing alienation with specific reference to the reader's own experience both as an individual human being and as an educator.

Basic Assumptions

From an analytical point of view, there are at least nine important issues or assumptions which can be derived from the various writings on alienation. They are as follows:

1. An individual's work (i.e., study) must be such that self expression is possible in it, if one is to find personal satisfaction and fulfillment in it. In other words, if a person is unable to express himself in what he does, then what he does becomes devoid of meaningful relationship to him.
2. The way one can achieve an objective embodiment of self-in-the-world is to produce objects, ideas, creations which reflect one's own personality.
3. To the extent that one's products, and one's self come under the control of others, they become alien to him.
4. A certain kind of solidarity (fellow-feeling) with others is possible if, and only if, one shares a set of values, beliefs, and practices, with them.
5. Conformity to socio-cultural institutions (schools) and the expectations of others substantially limits one's individuality.
6. A person is not as he should be to the extent that he does not exist in some sort of unity (solidarity) with others.
7. A person is not as he should be to the extent that he fails to develop a distinctive personality.
8. A person is not as he should be if he does not have an identity which transcends his distinctive personality, of the sort associated with a significant degree of conformity to the socio-cultural life and institutions of his society.
9. A person is not as he should be to the extent that his personality is not distinctive, but rather is shaped by impersonal socio-economic institutions and the expectations of others.

Elaboration

The word alienation comes from the Latin term alienatio. For centuries, it has had three main meanings: (a) the transfer of property or rights; (b) the act of turning away from friends (estrangement); and (c) insanity. By some scholars, alienation is held to denote a negative condition or sickness; for others it refers to a healthy, normal condition; still others use the term to refer to a process which just is - neither negative nor positive. However, the term seems to have a built-in negativity (separation, becoming a stranger) no matter who uses it.

Originally, to be alienated or estranged meant that one could only be alienated from someone or something which one was formerly attached to or identified with. However, the term alienation is now applied to situations where such a union has never existed but where the observer or critic feels that it should exist because it constitutes an ideal or necessity for normal, meaningful, or healthy form of life.

The varieties of alienation which are most often written about imply: An ideal situation from which a few, some, many, or all people have either separated (become alienated) or else have never identified with it at all. For example, a person may at one point in his life feel strongly identified with, and proud of, his work-products. At a later point, this same man, for many possible reasons, may no longer feel that his work-products are his own. He is no longer attached to what he produces - it has lost meaning for him. He has become alienated from what he does. Another individual may be alienated from his work-products - not because he has "lost" his attachment, but simply because he never felt an identity or attachment to them at any time. He too is alienated.

Alienation means "estrangement". To feel alienated is to regard the thing in question as "not-me" as foreign or alien (to me). To a degree alienation is inevitable. Just to think (about things) requires that one distinguish these things from oneself. Thought implies alienation.

The modern use of the concept alienation began with Hegel. He described a form of alienation that occurs when the individual (or individuals) comes into conflict with the surrounding culture, loses tacit identification with it, and comes to regard it as something "other" than himself. Hegel's conception of alienation contains more than the intellectual recognition that something is different from oneself. It includes elements of conflict with social institutions.

It was with Marx that the concept of alienation took on a dramatic form and found its way from philosophy into sociology, economics, politics, and education. Marx believed that work is an intensely expressive activity.

It is through work (both physical and mental) that people objectify or actualize themselves. Ideally, then, workers should be able to identify strongly with the products (things, ideas, actions) of their labor, and see them as profound sources of satisfaction. In much of society, however, people are not able to personally identify and value the results of their efforts. They are too controlled by others and by technical processes; they cannot see the connection between what they do as a working individual and the eventual product of the technical production process of which they are only a standard and insignificant part. Their own labor is too often converted into wealth for someone else. For these reasons Marx asserted that workers become alienated from their own products including their own efforts, and that they also become alienated from their fellow humans. While Marx's argument applies most clearly to the factory and labor situations, it can also be extrapolated either to society-at-large or to institutions within the society such as the school, the family, etc.

Current Analysis of Alienation

Since the time of Hegel and Marx, the concept of alienation has been broadened to include a great variety of conditions and has been used extensively in research and critique. Various devices have been developed to measure alienation. Probably because the concept of alienation has so many aspects, no universally accepted measure has been developed.

Seeman (1959) has analyzed the main elements of alienation which various measures of the concept try, in varying degrees, to capture. The five elements are:

1. Normlessness: An expectancy that socially unapproved actions are required to achieve certain goals because the society does not provide adequate socially approved means for attaining goals which are socially emphasized (such as becoming wealthy, getting high grades).
2. Meaninglessness: Not being clear about what one ought to believe; not knowing which values should guide one's life.

3. Powerlessness: Perceiving oneself as not being able to influence the events or forces which bear on one's major interests; lack of power to determine what one can or should do in life due to the overwhelming influence of factors greater than oneself.
4. Isolation: Not sharing the dominant values and beliefs of the surrounding culture.
5. De-humanization (Self-estrangement): Conditions under which one does work or other activities primarily to gain approval or rewards from other people, rather than from one's own satisfaction or approval.

It seems safe to assume that these five conditions can either be regarded as combining to make up "alienation" or are in varying degrees associated with alienation. Regardless of the particular definition adopted by those who study alienation (as well as those who experience it) most are agreed upon the feeling-states which alienation stands for: grief, pain, despair, anger, and (perhaps worst of all) unfeeling.

Alienation and School Life

Some students of present society concern themselves with what appears to be increasing estrangement between the young (children, youth and young adults) and the not-so-young. One such investigator is Urie Bronfenbrenner and it is his exposition (1974) which stimulates the following paragraphs.

To Bronfenbrenner, "the crux of the problem lies in the failure of the young person to be integrated into his society... p. 53." The alienated young person feels uninterested, disconnected, and often, hostile to the people, activities, and things in his environment. He may want to "do his own thing" but often is not sure just what that is.

Thoughtful, responsible adults might take the following attitude toward alienated young:

- i. explore the origins of alienation;
- ii. identify the circumstances which give rise to it; and
- iii. consider how these circumstances might be altered to reverse the process from alienation to integration (identification).

Although alienation is experienced concretely in the lives of individual human beings, it has roots in the institutions of society such as the family, day-care, school, neighborhood, work place, hospitals, prisons, etc.

To the extent that school life insulates children from direct meaningful engagement in social tasks, as an institution it is alienating the young. School life, in both Canada and the United States is peculiarly one-sided with an emphasis on subject matter to the exclusion of the development of the pupil as a responsible social being. In German, the word *Erziehung* denotes this aspect of education or development of the child. We have, in English, no suitable equivalent but it means approximately, rearing, upbringing, cultivation, breeding. The Russians refer to this element of development as *vospitanie* and the French name it *éducation*. Many countries in Europe designate this process as extremely important and one which properly belongs in school life. It is the "core" of the educational process - developing the child's qualities as a person - his values, motives, incentives and patterns of social responses. This critical element is conspicuous by its absence in Canadian schools. Despite lip-service rhetoric by educational officials the separation between school and community appears to be growing rather than decreasing and the separation between study of "subjects" and the education of the child's character remains, thus making the school an ever more potent agent of alienation.

As a practical way to begin thinking about alienation in your school, I have prepared two checklists, one for teachers and one for students. The checklists are given on the following pages and can be used as an initial method of identifying and discussing with others the degree to which you and students find alienation to be a reality in daily living. The first step in such an investigation is the development of a critical consciousness, i.e., learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions within school life. Only by gaining such a consciousness is it possible to gain a clear basis for deciding whether or not to take action against alienating elements within school life. Thought and study do not "solve" alienation. However, they form the necessary basis for action.

Alienation Checklist For Teachers

	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
<u>Organization</u>				
1. Teachers don't have much to say about how this school is run.	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. There's not much I can do about the way I'm treated as a teacher whether I like it or not.	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. Authority is pretty strong from the top down here.	_____	_____	_____	_____
<u>Affect Toward Co-workers</u>				
1. Most of the people who work here really don't care about me.	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. In this school you are expected to handle your own problems.	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. I don't feel very close to most of my colleagues here at this school.	_____	_____	_____	_____
<u>Affect Toward Pupils</u>				
1. So far as I'm concerned a lot of kids in this school are pretty hopeless.	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. My job is to teach pupils, not make friends with them.	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. I think that a lot of kids here are just putting in time.	_____	_____	_____	_____
<u>Affect Toward School Involvement</u>				
1. I can hardly wait to go home from work most of the time.	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. Teaching at this school is not very enjoyable for me.	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. Whenever I can, I like to get away from it all.	_____	_____	_____	_____
TOTAL	_____	_____	_____	_____

Alienation Checklist For Students

	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
1. Nobody here lets us make decisions for ourselves.	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. There's not much I can do about the way I am treated at school.	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. Most teachers don't care much what happens to me.	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. Most teachers are not really interested in the opinions I give in class.	_____	_____	_____	_____
5. If I see somebody ruining or stealing school property, I think, "good for you".	_____	_____	_____	_____
6. School is really boring for me.	_____	_____	_____	_____
7. I'd rather do just about anything other than go to school.	_____	_____	_____	_____
8. School is preparing me to do what I want to do.	_____	_____	_____	_____
9. School is helping me learn how to be a good citizen.	_____	_____	_____	_____
10. The things I learn in school really help me to understand what is going on around me.	_____	_____	_____	_____
TOTAL	_____	_____	_____	_____