As interested citizens we are increasingly made aware, through media and personal experience, of various manifestations of alienation that are occurring in our schools today. School vandalism is reaching epidemic proportions, the rate of pregnancy among teenage girls is on the rise, and the use and abuse of illicit drugs remains a serious problem. Many of our youngsters have a limited understanding of more socially acceptable modes of behavior. Hoy has pointed out that since the school represents the primary point of contact between social institutions and the young, it seems logical that the norms, values, and authority structure of the school may become the focus of rejection among alienated students. (1)

The experimental study which will be discussed in this article was done as part of a Ph.D. project by the author of this article. The purpose of the study was to reduce three dimensions of student alienation by use of general semantics instruction. The experiment was conducted in a New York City junior high school over a 19 week period from December 1978–April 1979. Eighth and ninth grade students who were referred for counseling were the units of analysis.

Typically, referred students showed behaviors such as being verbally abusive in class, consistently disruptive in class, regularly late or absent, and physically abusive to teachers and/or peers. Many of them show evidence of drug abuse. It seemed to the investigator, as was later confirmed by attitudinal testing, that these students were alienated from school.

* Martin H. Levinson is Human Relations Advisor at the New York City Board of Education.
Alienation

Researchers have used the term "alienation" to refer to anomie, loss of self, despair, apathy, loneliness, rootlessness, powerlessness, isolation, meaninglessness, pessimism, neutralism, and a host of others. The most common usage of the term alienation deals with identifying feelings of estrangement or detachment from the self, others, or society in general.

The term has evolved, in present day usage, mostly from the works of Marx, Durkheim, and Merton. Marx was primarily concerned with the powerlessness of the worker to control the output of his labor and, consequently, his place in society. (2) Durkheim, in his well-known sociological study of suicide, used the term "anomie" to describe the state of anxiety, isolation, and purposelessness observed in the suicidal individual. (3) Merton, building on the work of Durkheim, was concerned with deviant behavioral patterns that emerge when the goals of a social system and the opportunity for all the members to reach these goals are not congruent. (4) The writings of Marx, Durkheim, and Merton have provided at least three separate but related ways to view the concept of alienation.

Contemporary writers such as Riesman, (5) Fromm (6), Friedenberg, (7) Keniston, (8) and Erikson (9) have adapted the ideas of Marx, Durkheim, and Merton and shaped them to fit particular interests.

This study made use of the socio-psychological typology of See- man, (10) which describes separate, researchable dimensions of alienation. Three of those dimensions, powerlessness, self-estrangement, and cultural estrangement, were explored in a school-based setting.

Each of these variants of alienation will now be presented and briefly reviewed in the following paragraphs:

Powerlessness. Student powerlessness refers to the student's sense of a lack of personal control over his state of affairs in school. He believes that he is being manipulated by teachers and administrators, "the system," and there is little he personally can do to influence his future in school.

Self-estrangement. Self-estrangement toward school is exemplified by students who are unable to find school activities that are self-rewarding. School activities are engaged in not for their own sake, but for some other reason such as a passing grade or a way to alleviate possible parental disapproval over poor achievement.

Cultural estrangement. The culturally estranged have goals and priorities which differ from those of the institution in which they must work and live. On the junior high school level, this may take the form of street gang membership, dropping out of school, or participating in street crimes.
General Semantics and Alienation

General semantics is a re-educational system. It is re-educational in its intent to alter previous ways of thinking. The young, in particular, need more effective ways to gather information and make wise decisions since they lack experience to guide them.

Johnson underlined this need when he described the "IFD" syndrome (from idealism to frustration to demoralization), which is very prevalent in those who become alienated from various aspects of society. (11) Many people set up ideals for themselves which they do not attain, and this causes frustration. Those who do not handle this frustration constructively become demoralized, which can often lead to alienation. Students are particularly susceptible to the IFD syndrome, since the young tend to be more idealistic than adults. Johnson's *People in Quandaries* contains many examples showing how general semantics intervention can reduce the effects of the IFD syndrome by motivating students to channel their frustrations into productive problem solving.

Past research has shown that general semantics has increased students' mastery over specific affective and cognitive areas. Students exposed to general semantics treatments have increased their critical thinking ability, (12) increased their creativity, (13) improved their composition writing, (14) improved their personality adjustment, (15) and decreased their prejudice. (16) Each of these studies was conducted in a school setting, and each found significant correlations between general semantics and the dependent variable. Students in these studies improved their functioning and, in essence, gained a greater sense of personal control over their state of affairs in school.

Unfortunately, students who are alienated do not seem to show effective control in the school environment. In addition, students who are alienated may be well adjusted to maladjustment, and have difficulty communicating their needs for a variety of reasons. For example, they may be using language in ways which further increase their separation from themselves and others. Johnson, in *Your Most Enchanted Listener*, illustrates how the language of maladjustment, consisting of self-talk (thoughts) not corresponding to reality, can have such a self-alienating effect. (17) It was thought that general semantics could counter this effect by training people to use language as scientists do when they are being scientific — to be more accurate. If the alienated student could be taught to articulate his needs more clearly, and better understand the point of view of others, then it seemed that his alienation would be more susceptible to treatment.

Students in the present study often spoke to the investigator of their antagonism toward traditionally accepted patterns of academic life.
Many attended school only because they were legally required to, and seemed to find little relevance once they arrived. This feeling of lack of relevance seemed in some ways to parallel the experience of the founder of general semantics.

The destruction and devastation caused by World War I had the effect of culturally estranging Korzybski from his peers and society. He reacted to his feelings of alienation by writing *Manhood of Humanity* (18) and *Science and Sanity* (19) which contain the basic principles of general semantics. He was concerned with developing a preventive approach to the conflicts and misunderstandings which had escalated the world into great violence and hatred. He modelled his system after the scientific method, which he thought was responsible for some of the greatest discoveries of our century. He found that general semantics enabled him to resolve his feelings of cultural estrangement and become more involved with society. Korzybski also thought that his system would be of special benefit to young people, since they are less biased and set in their ways than adults.

The investigator supposed that general semantics instruction might be particularly appealing to alienated students as an alternative to standard learning motivation. Instead of getting traditional motivational approaches to learning, students would be introduced to a method which views reality as process, emphasizes adaptability, and promotes the use of language to formulate questions capable of solution. Scientists base their efforts and reap their rewards by employing these principles with great effectiveness in their technical laboratories. Alienated students would be taught general semantics, a method which has been distilled from science, in order to act more effectively in the "living laboratory of the school." If students experienced success using this orientation, it seemed likely they would be more willing to become more involved with the traditional goals of school.

**EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN**

It was hypothesized that general semantics instruction would result in a decreased sense of powerlessness, self-estrangement, and cultural estrangement toward school.

The pretest-posttest randomized block design was used to test these hypotheses. (20) Referred students went through an intake and screening procedure, which acquainted them with general counseling procedures and provided time to obtain parental consent. The total accessible population consisted of 130 students. The first 70 of these students, who had agreed to be in the counseling program and had obtained parental consent, were blocked by grade (eighth and ninth) and
randomly assigned to groups. There were 6 ninth and 4 eighth grade groups, with an equal number of experimental and control groups for each grade. The remaining 60 students were seen on an individual basis and not included in the experiment.

The experimental groups received an alienation pretest, two introductory group development sessions, 16 general semantics lessons, and an alienation posttest over a 19 week period.

The 16 general semantics lessons were devised by the investigator and based on materials from leading general semantics authorities.

The control groups received an alienation pretest, two introductory group development sessions, 16 standard adjustment lessons, and an alienation posttest over the same 19 week period. The control groups were given 16 traditional guidance oriented lessons based on the Coping With series. (21)

The Pupil Attitude Questionnaire (PAQ) was used to assess the alienation dimensions of powerlessness, self-estrangement, and cultural estrangement. (22) This instrument contains subtests which measure Seeman's alienation components.

Alpha coefficients of reliability were computed on the pretest results for the three dimensions of alienation being investigated. The reliability for the powerlessness subscale was .88, for self-estrangement, .92, and for cultural estrangement, .86.

Each of the experimental and control groups met once a week during a 45 minute class period. To eliminate the Hawthorne effect — the phenomenon whereby the very fact of the subjects being part of an experiment becomes a variable in itself — none of the subjects were told of the experiment. All students were told that the purpose of the program was to help them to cope more effectively in school.

The investigator, who has been counseling students for five years, conducted all group sessions. There was an awareness of the need to control for possible expectancy effects. Such effects refer to a behavioral science phenomenon in which hypotheses held by investigators can lead them unintentionally to alter their behavior toward their subjects in such a way as to increase the likelihood that their subjects will respond so as to confirm their hypotheses or expectations. To mediate possible expectancy effects the investigator reviewed all of the lesson plans with a colleague prior to the experiment. It was arranged for this colleague to be present at all of the sessions during the course of the experiment. Feedback was given after each session to control for possible investigator bias due to expectancy effects.

A general semantics test was given at the end of the experiment to all of the subjects to determine if the experimental subjects had mastered the material, and to ascertain if contamination had occurred within the control groups.
THE RESEARCH RESULTS

At the beginning of the experiment the pretest scores of the experimental and control groups were looked at to determine baseline levels of alienation. In addition, $t$-tests were performed on the experimental and control groups to determine if the groups were equivalent in the three dimensions of alienation being investigated. The pretest results indicated that the experimental and control groups were equivalent and both highly alienated. The breakdown by grade showed the same results — high alienation and equivalence among groups.

It was hypothesized that general semantics instruction would result in a decreased sense of powerlessness, self-estrangement and cultural estrangement toward school. To test these hypotheses, pretest and posttest mean scores for each of the alienation dimensions were determined for the experimental and control groups. Then pretest means were subtracted from posttest means within groups, and an $t$-test was computed between the gain scores of the experimental and control groups. All tests of significance were conducted at the .05 level.

The test results gave strong support, beyond the .001 level, that general semantics instruction results in a decrease of powerlessness, self-estrangement, and cultural estrangement toward school. This level of support held for both eighth and ninth grade groups. The results of the general semantics test indicated that experimental subjects had a thorough understanding of general semantics principles. The test consisted of 20 statements which were subject to general semantics analysis. If at least one appropriate general semantics principle was included in the answer it was scored correct. Sixty-five was set as the passing grade. Every student in the experimental group scored 80% or higher. No one in the control groups scored higher than 45%. It was concluded that high levels of experimental treatment contamination had not occurred in the control groups.

DISCUSSION

The investigator noted that students in the experimental groups were eager and able to apply general semantics principles to school related problems. Many subjects analyzed and discussed classroom problems using general semantics principles exclusively. Some also shared this newly learned knowledge with their teachers, who in turn were motivated to ask the investigator for more information about general semantics. However, at the beginning of the experiment some of the teachers complained to the investigator about the “irritating” comments that some of the experimental subjects were making in class: “The trouble with you Mr. Smith is that you are too inten-
sional,” “You obviously know nothing about the is of identity.” The investigator, in response to teacher complaints and as part of the instruction, reminded the students that they might be tempted to use their knowledge in ways that would promote rather than reduce conflict. The students were advised of the value of applying appropriate principles judiciously and with good humor during classroom interactions in order to minimize misunderstanding on the part of their instructors. The admonition was underlined by pointing out that publicly correcting the semantics errors of their teachers would result in increasing teacher antipathy and decreasing student grades. In a relatively short time teacher complaints were greatly reduced, as the students developed more tolerance for those who did not have the benefits of their general semantics training.

It is interesting to note that other studies in this field have indicated that students who are slow learners or poor readers would not be able to grasp and apply general semantics principles effectively. The reasoning offered is that general semantics is too abstract or too difficult for the slow learner. The results of this study refute the inferences of these earlier studies, and indicate that students who have been labelled slow, can master and apply general semantics with a high degree of competence.

It was also interesting to find that the control methodology appeared extremely ineffective in reducing alienation. In the five control groups there was only a very slight reduction in the levels of powerlessness, self-estrangement, and cultural estrangement. Perhaps this indicates that an increased emphasis on non-traditional instruction is required for problems as deeply rooted as alienation toward school. Standard adjustment curricula, such as the one that the control group received, may be of more benefit for students who show lower levels of alienation toward school. Students in these lower ranges may have already internalized some of the major goals and values that the school advocates. They would then be more open to the examples and motivations of the standard adjustment curriculum.

However, highly alienated students, as the alienation pretest results showed students in this study to be, may need systems of instruction that offer new outlooks from which to view problems and conflicts. The experimental groups received such an outlook that included general semantics concepts such as sensitivity to contextual meanings, awareness of the limitations of a two valued orientation, knowledge that one cannot say all there is to say about everything, a framework geared toward looking for differences rather than similarities, an ability to tolerate uncertainty, and an appreciation that meaning is not in words, but in people. Johnson summarizes these concepts by the use of the term “thoughtful uncertainty.” (23) He explains that thought-
ful uncertainty causes students to be less dogmatic and more discriminating in their responses, which makes them shy away from taking more extreme stands.

I have selected some experimental group student responses to the general semantics test which, in my opinion, illustrate some examples of thoughtful uncertainty. The first example is from an eighth grade boy who seemed intuitively to understand along with Wittgenstein that the limits of our language represent the limits of our world. In response to the statement, “mules are stubborn,” he wrote, “I’ve read mules are stubborn but maybe that’s because we don’t know how to talk to them.” A similar recognition of our imperfect human understanding of animal motivations came from a ninth grade girl. She responded to the statement, “A pig is a dirty animal,” with, “Maybe his friends don’t think so. Pigs probably have different standards than we do. Besides why would a pig need to wash up? Where is he going?” This student’s response was certainly a far cry from the “yes” or “no” answers which were obtained from a majority of the non-general semantics trained students.

Another interesting analysis came from a young lady who when presented with, “All men are born equal,” replied, “Why don’t you say all people are born equal. You’d still be wrong but at least you’d be fair.” I thought that this response, combining a recognition of the sexist bias of our language and the limitations of an “allness” statement, represented a particularly sophisticated point of view.

Another sophisticated response was offered by a ninth grade girl to the commonly held belief that the meanings of words are found in dictionaries. She proclaimed, “The meanings of words alone are found in dictionaries. The meanings of words used by people in sentences are found in people.”

However, my personal favorite was thought up by a ninth grade boy who was not to be trapped by “two-value, either-or reasoning.” To “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” he came back with, “Sometimes you can’t even teach a new dog new tricks. Any way you probably can teach an old dog new tricks if you give him food that he likes.”

**CONCLUSION**

The Club of Rome suggests that just as ecology was raised to high levels of concern 10 years ago, the issue of learning must now be made a matter of top-level concern. (24) They suggest that schools should engage in “anticipatory learning” that prepares people to look ahead and to evaluate future consequences. Their report encourages teachers to search for better ways to educate, so that students will be prepared for present and future challenges.
The research that has been done in general semantics should aid educators in their search for anticipatory learning strategies. Previous school-based research has indicated that general semantics instruction results in a variety of constructive changes in the achievement and attitude of students. All of the previous researchers have recommended that general semantics be taught on a wider scale. The author of this article echoes this recommendation in order to better prepare our students for present and future challenges in the most complex world mankind has ever known.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


