

CINEMA

BBC feature records lives of young Britons



In 1964, young Granada Television researcher Michael Apted chose 14 seven-year-old children to be the subject of a BBC documentary "7 Up." The project was so successful that Apted came back every seven years to see how the youngsters were doing, and created a new feature to show for it.

"28 Up" is more than a slice of life at 28. It's a thread of life. Apted has sifted through the four different periods and put together a film that doesn't merely peek in at one stage of development but follows through and compares where these people were as children with where they are now as adults.

"28 Up" is also the study of an environment — the British school system and class-based society. As the children grow up, their surroundings have an effect on their adult lives.

The brightest moments are, of course, with the seven-year-olds. Seven is the age where kids say what they really feel. At times, this tendency may embarrass them later — at 14, at 21 and at 28. At seven, the subjects look into the camera, jostle their comrades (three upper-class boys and three middle-class girls were interviewed as trios) and say about anything that comes into their heads.

The question that is repeatedly addressed is "Do we see the

adult in the child at age seven?" Of course, to a certain extent it is true. The soft-spoken mathematician who at seven took delight in the nature of the universe teaches nuclear physics at 28 at an American university. The kid who wanted to travel to Africa to teach now teaches the underprivileged in London's West End.

These are success stories, and there are others, but can you call the life of two of the three upper-class kids who mapped out their lives in front of a camera at age seven and then went on to fulfill every detail of them a success?

The four women interviewed (apart from the wives of two of the men) found happiness in marriage and raising families. Simon, the young black fellow raised in a boarding house has similarly found happiness in his family, but he has also found satisfaction in the manual-labor position that, seven years ago, he predicted he'd leave.

The most sobering case is Neil who, at 28, is a drifter, a dropout surviving on odd jobs. At seven, Neil wanted to go to the moon.

No system is a monolith and "28 Up" certainly doesn't condemn the British school system but what it shows doesn't speak highly of Britain or America. There's enough variety for people to point to a character or two to prove that success comes to those who deserve it, but then the whole question of who deserves what comes into question. Undoubtedly, the upper-class boys worked through public school, crammed for exams and earned their Oxford University degrees. Would they, however, have worked so hard if, like Neil or Simon or cab driver Tony, they hadn't even the hope of going to Oxford?

Certainly, it is fascinating on a sociological level to see the kids become adults and to check in with them at moments in their lives. More than simply a case study, however, this film makes us privy to the dreams, aspirations and values of these people, and how those things change over time. Most of the bright-eyed youngsters do find some happiness at 28, but at what cost to the spirit and the drive of that child within them?

"28 Up" has been praised by teachers, sociologists and critics as a unique glimpse into what it's really like to see someone grow up. It's also a brilliant exploration of a society that molds these minds and personalities. "28 Up" will never settle any of the "heredity vs. environment" arguments once and for all (again, no system is a monolith), but Apted seems to have found some convincing evidence on the side of environment.

By Sean Axmaker
Friday, April 11, 1986

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