

## A Climate for Self-Improvement

Richard L. Foster

IN America today it is difficult to achieve an educational climate that is conducive to the self-development of the individual teacher. Many factors in the present framework of education in the twentieth century work against any organization dedicated to human needs.

Unusual leadership is necessary for the achievement of a school situation in which the self-realization of each teacher has high priority. If the development of this circumstance is difficult, the attempt to describe it in words is even more challenging and explosive. There is much danger that the opportunist in education will pick up words but not feelings; will stage the interactions without truly experiencing them; and might manipulate the environment and the people to his own ends.

The freedom to experiment is an essential ingredient in the process of self-improvement. An individual must understand that he has the power and the dignity to experiment, to believe, to feel and to make mistakes. How to achieve this climate of freedom in a school and how to establish conditions that will allow for the emergence of an open society are the considerations of this issue of *Educational Leadership*.

One approach to writing about such a climate is to state some basic hypotheses that might be conducive to the de-

velopment of the emergent individual. Through these, the reader may gain an insight into these concerns of the current issue:

*The ordinary organization of a school structure predisposes people, especially those at the teaching level, to feel alienated.*

Most school systems are organized in a business-military style, with a hierarchy consisting of the Board and the Superintendent at the top. The teachers and children are placed in an inferior position at the extreme bottom. This kind of organization inherently reinforces feelings of inadequacy. It encourages indifference and stifles enthusiasm for creative teaching. The alienation is not relieved by salary schedules, merit pay, or sabbatical leaves, but remains an integral part of the structure. Unfortunately, changing the structure is no simple matter. It will require a radical realignment of personnel to a more fluid relationship. The concept of hierarchy must go!

*No human being, in a final analysis, can be held responsible for the development of or the change in any other individual.*

In some school organizations there is an inference by the consultants, supervisors and principals that they, because of their roles, have a responsibility to

change teachers. This assumption is based on a theory that purports an absolute right and wrong way to teach. The authority figure feels compelled to enforce the program in the "right way." In reality, in any interaction an individual is responsible only to express freely his own points of view, philosophies or attitudes toward a given situation. He is not responsible for change in any other person. When members of a school organization are able to communicate their points of view on a wide range of subjects in an open frame of reference, such communication can easily be understood. Time need not be spent searching for hidden agendas, unconscious hostilities, or nonverbal symbols for true meanings. Although this open communication might be painful at times, it provides a most sustained pleasure over a long span because it is human centered. Any school district desiring an environment for self-improvement might do well to look at its openness to communication.

*Change occurs when human beings have new involvements, new interactions, new experiences and new perceptions.*

Change is not likely to occur in any kind of sustained manner through administrative decree, superintendent's bulletin, board policies, or national pronouncements. A responsibility of the school system is to develop an environment in which anxiety is low so that one feels free to perceive and to experience many different involvements. A teacher needs, in addition, the opportunity to experiment in an environment in which mistakes are accepted and looked upon as healthy; an environment in which one is encouraged to admit, "It didn't work, but I got a new idea from it!" In-service experiences can flow in such a free environment, and the teacher is able to select what he can incorporate

within his own personality. Self-improvement and self-actualization may emerge from this hypothesis of change.

*Self-improvement is a very personal thing and is most likely to occur through a one to one interaction or in a small group.*

Large group meetings may be worthwhile in communicating mass knowledge, but have little effect in themselves on human change, unless some communication on an individual level takes place. A school system must provide multiple opportunities for involvement and for perceptions on an intimate basis. One must have time, inclination and freedom to perceive and to interact closely with children's learning, the teaching-learning act, on the values of a culture and on the purposes of education, if the concept of self-improvement is to emerge.

*The principal is more likely to be the instructional leader of a school in a district which operates on a decentralized hypothesis.*

In this frame of reference, the local school staff decides on its major needs, how these needs can be met at the local building level, and what help is required from central office consultants. The local staff has the freedom to hire outside consultants without external administrative detail. The school feels responsible for its own behavior, its own program and its own interaction development.

The building principal, in this decentralized situation finds, with the staff, unique ways to use consultation help. He has the right to terminate consultation when it is no longer effective for the task at hand. The central office consultant operating in this environment may perform in a truly professional relationship with the total staff. He is not as likely to be

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etal needs or into political, economic and moral decision making. His power resides principally in the knowledge he brings to bear upon the exercise of his professional responsibilities. The only hope of professional educators for full partnership in decision making in the educative process is incumbent on taking the necessary risks to gain the knowledge needed.

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#### Editorial—Foster

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confronted with displaced hostility of the teachers or to be met with indifference. In the centralized approach, decision making is taken away from the classroom level and often results in psychological detachment of the teacher.

Self-development of the teacher must be inspired and nurtured by a sympathetic environment. Some of the basic hypotheses for this growth have here been presented. The articles in this issue will support, extend and test these theories.

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