

Pressures on Pupils in the School

PERCEIVED pressures are a common yardstick for assessing the impact of the times upon people. However imprecise our estimate of the pressures may be, knowing that they exist helps us to a better realization of the complexity of some of the forces that affect peoples' lives. With such knowledge, and in line with our values, we can turn to modification or alleviation of pressures found to be harmful. Curriculum workers rightly are concerned with the accurate identification and analysis of the many pressures directed toward children and youth. Out of their efforts may be expected to come both emphases on curriculum content and instructional procedures.

These compelling influences of society—in effect, pressures at large—have been given much attention by curriculum workers. Almost every observer, and surely the conscientious schoolman, recognizes the importance of a multitude of social pressures. Such pressures exact their toll in anxieties, frustrations, and general torments among children and youth. . . . The nightmare of cataclysmic blast, mushroom aftermath, and misty seeds of deathly fallout. . . . Empty stomachs before the next distribution of surplus commodities. . . . Life in clois-

tered suburbs shutting out the realities of truly significant differences of race, religion, and economic circumstance. . . . Even the threat of peace in the foreseeable future. . . . Evidence of the impact of such societal pressures takes the form of alienated, abused, and forgotten children and youth.

Great societal pressures are not the exclusive concern of educators; they belong to the consciousness of the race. Their dramatic nature, however, may well overwhelm the concern, lure the interests, and, in the process, dissipate the energies of sincere schoolmen. For such dilution of intent to transpire would be tragic; so would be the spectacle of educators disengaged—even disinterested—in the mighty forces engulfing young people in these days. An even greater tragedy awaits educators who—in their role as educators—fail to cope with an aspect of today's impact on school children that is clearly in their domain. For not the least of the pressures imprisoning and enfeebling children are those created, condoned and continued in the setting of the school.

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Educators are not unaware of this awesome and numbing observation. Over the years, the pedagogic tradition is honored by the sensitive recognition of pressure points and their deft removal from the educational enterprise. Other reactions to pressures, however, also deserve attention. Important pressures within schools have existed, noticed, perhaps, but unfronted by educators, until high drama or sensational journalism has singled them out as targets for action. Too many of the presumed pressures on pupils not infrequently represent superficial concerns while the truly troubling pressures remain nearby, unseen and frustrating.

Three school situations dominate most discussions about pressures on pupils: automated instructional procedures and devices; introduction of subject matter earlier than in the traditional curricular sequence; and specific pressures for "excellence." These pressures are related, in several instances, but usually are seen as separate problems crying for immediate ameliorative responses.

Automated Instruction

No school actually has been automated, in process or in personnel. Yet, the nightmare of this possibility is very real to many people. Real enough, in fact, to prompt and sustain heated harangue about the depersonalization of education, the loss of pupil identity, and the increase in pressures on pupils. Speculation is seldom inhibited by available research results—and for sufficient reason. The research is largely irrelevant to the points of controversy.

In fact, most hard research evidence on automated instruction has had to do with presentation, reinforcement, response, and program construction vari-

ables. These research emphases have been accompanied by bold and brash pronouncements of an impending instructional revolution, overturning familiar curriculum patterns and instructional processes and implying, to the unwary, the elimination of vast numbers of teachers. Many of the pronouncements have carried an undeserved urgency as a few vocal researchers have generalized their findings far beyond the limits of their evidence. Indeed, a great opportunity for research has been lost. This missed research possibility was the pressure on teachers created by the claque for automated instruction and teachers' responses to this pressure situation. Description of these effects must now be, by necessity, impressionistic and, in large part, historical.

Pressures on pupils arising from the automated instructional situation are clearly more presumed than real. Laying aside propaganda and passion, research reports are silent with respect to harassing and oppressive effects of these procedures on pupils. That tensions and anxiety may accompany some pupils' learning in these situations is possible, even predictable. Empirical evidence on this point, however, is simply unavailable. To be able to forestall the debilitating effects of such situations on even a few pupils is patently important. Of more general significance is the desirability of predicting the *facilitating* effects of such situations on pupils. These elusive, researchable problems are crucial for making appropriate instructional decisions.

Pupils' reactions provide some tangential evidence about the possible pressures inherent in automated instruction. This evidence takes the form of scattered crumbs left after the conclusions have been written. These crumbs, however,

are insufficient to make a case. Two observations are pertinent. First, pupils seldom object to programs at the outset. In fact, at first pupils seem to enjoy them. After a period of time, however, pupils may show both a drop in their interest in the materials and other reactions characteristic of boredom. Second, while publicity surrounds the growing numbers of pupils in an automated instructional situation, almost no notice is given to the abandonment of such procedures by a school. Yet, the word gets passed. Some schools, after "trying out" automated instruction, have dropped these innovations, in effect turning their back on the "impending revolution."

Two questions about these observations are compelling: "Why?" and "Of what consequence?" Answers at present must be tentative and, essentially, conjectural. For example, are pupils bored with automated instruction for the same reasons, whatever they are, that they are bored by other materials and procedures? Boredom in school, still, is not confined to textbooks, group discussion, library research, and other instructional practices. Such boredom characterizes, for different pupils in different situations, aspects of the total school program. Indeed, if boredom is the general problem here, then it must be attacked in all its manifestations. To single out automated instruction is to scapegoat with a vengeance. Surely, research efforts into these problems—boredom and diffusion of innovation—may be conducted in the milieu of automated instruction, but should not be limited to it.

Pushing Subject Matter Down

A clear sign of the times appears to be the general reordering of schools' curricular sequences. Across the land,

efforts in this regard most often are conducted under the name of "experimentation." Thus it is that some schools are "experimenting" in the introduction of reading instruction to kindergarten children. Other schools report "experiments" in teaching calculus or probability theory to high school students, in presenting "set theory" to first graders, and political science to second and third graders. These activities are commonly maligned by their detractors as "attempts to push subject matter down."

The range of such reordering "experiments" is wide and encompasses topics, even entire courses, from nearly all curricular areas. Characteristic of most of these "experiments" are two interesting, if not impressive factors: (a) fragmentary rather than comprehensive curriculum planning and testing, and (b) impressionistic rather than rigorous assessment of the results of the innovation.

The first factor may be libeled as rampant opportunism. On the other hand, for some topics and sequences to be considered for pupils in a pattern unlike the traditional one, fragmentary efforts may have value. That school beginners can learn mathematics in the productive terms of set theory gives call to reexamine much of the sequence in the mathematics curriculum. For, if first graders can accomplish this type of result, what is reasonable and proper, mathematically speaking, for them to confront in grade two? and in subsequent years? Too, such efforts dramatize the inadequacy of the still widely accepted theory of deferment in curriculum organization. The conclusions of a number of studies demonstrate that children can learn some topics—many involving complex concepts—earlier than once was thought possible. Such information is admittedly heady wine, for it

leads to questioning the appropriateness of current topic and grade placement generally. It also creates pressures for rethinking curriculum components and sequence and, too, pressures on those educators who choose not to let their traditional viewpoints be modified by contemporary evidence.

In their fragmentary form, at least, these curriculum reordering efforts have not resulted in pressures on pupils. Yet, the awareness exists that in such situations, pressures may develop. From such a speculative position derives much of the vigorous opposition to teaching kindergartners and younger children to read.

Reading, part of the argument goes, is virtually synonymous for successful school beginning. If *some* pre-first graders learn to read as a result of instruction, then pressure is expected from parents and teachers to instruct *all* children of this age. Pressures on teachers would then be passed on to the children. Disabilities caused by excessive pressures on children as they are taught to read are well documented. This dissenting case seems tightly drawn, but the logic is faulty. To instruct *all* children in reading, in kindergarten, in first grade, or at another level, without respect for their readiness and other factors, is professional irresponsibility. To teach those pre-first graders to read who are ready and want to learn is surely to "move subject matter down." But more, it is to meet and teach youngsters with a subject matter appropriate to them.

Controversy surrounding efforts to re-order curricular sequence is intensified by much of the impressionistic assessment of experimental results. Too frequently, the studies are not carefully conceptualized and designed, preventing both the collection of the most relevant

data and the rigorous analysis of the obtained data. From too many "experiments" comes the casual conclusion that the pupils learned the material presented to them. The discussion proceeds to imply, if not to state, that all pupils can satisfactorily meet this learning task. This type of generalization, sweeping and incompetent, portends ill for pupils. In order that spurious claims of "research says" may not become crushing pressures on pupils, adequately designed experiments must be insisted upon. An essential design ingredient is provision for specification of the identifiable group(s) of pupils who profited from the instructional treatment and the groups(s) which did not benefit from the instruction. Information thus obtained makes possible more accurate prescription of educative treatments including, for some identifiable pupils, "moving subject matter down."

Drives for Excellence

Liberating influences on many pupils have accompanied the present drive for excellence in schooling. More and varied curricular opportunities, special class provisions, increased library holdings, and a greater concern for intellectual pursuits are illustrative. Yet, excellence has called forth increased pressures on pupils—as well as on teachers, parents, and the community at large. To "play the game"—in chemistry, chorus or football—is not good enough. Anything short of excellence bears the stigma of failure. Excellence, too, has come to be judged against a public, rather than a personal criterion. Research evidence on the many pressures for excellence is, for the moment, essentially clinical. But the massive clinical data are impressive—and mounting.

Testing in the search for talent is one of the serious pressure points of drives for excellence. The importance of academic aptitude testing is not an imagined phenomenon. It is very real and present.

Various "admissions"—to certain classes, to curricular tracks, and to college—are commonly based on test marks. The pressure is on pupils to score as high as possible on certain tests or jeopardize their aspirations. The perceived cruciality of "good" scores on College Boards, for example, is noticed each examining period. Students and parents both relate the agony and anxiety with which the test is anticipated and taken.

A cultural, as different from a personal, effect of the present mania for aptitude testing is also being noted. That is, pupils perform better in academic aptitude (IQ-type) test situations than they do in achievement testing situations. Thus is observed the possibly higher social value of IQ abilities than of achievement abilities. "Getting in" is seen by pupils as more important than "doing." If subsequent studies substantiate this observation, a rather fundamental change in American society may be predicted.

Also products of the school and the larger society are pressures for conforming behaviors and for a restricted range of acceptable cognitive operations. Schools probably should not be looked upon by pupils as refuges from society; their very nature implies, nevertheless, that their impact on children and youth should be liberating. Evidence of many liberating influences is too frequently unseen. Conforming pupils, for example, are known to get the preferred grades and rewards. Mute testimony to the restricting pressures of schooling was the presentation of the 1964 Golden Key award to a nationally prominent news-

caster—and school dropout. His teacher commented that the school had failed him.

There are serious risks inherent in the suggestion that pressures for intellectual conformity be relaxed and that a disposition for divergent thinking be facilitated. Unexpected solutions and proposals may have to be entertained. To be risked is the possibility of general chaos with respect to established goals, operations and activities. Those prepared to propose these modifications of pressure must be prepared to probe deeply the desirability of so doing—and then live with the results. In the pressure situations of schooling, all those affected are not enfeebled.

Little Pressures Grown Large

The dramatic possibilities of pressures on pupils in some situations—like automated instruction and reordering curricular sequence—may obscure less visible, but potentially more harmful pressures in the school setting. These pressures of the commonplace have been in the school situation in various guises for many years. Their persistence has been challenged at times by modifying attempts. Under scrutiny, such situations tend to be camouflaged by "respectable" verbiage and behaviors or, else, evaporate into the "conclusion" of no real problem.

Examples of these types of pressures on pupils may be located without extensive search. Brief glimpses of four hypothetical, but all too familiar cases illustrate the diversity of the "little" pressures.

Kim awakened sick on a recent Wednesday morning. He complained of an upset stomach and refused his breakfast. His mother kept him home from

school feeling that he might be taking the flu. Kim's condition changed little throughout the day. When his second grade sister arrived home from school, Kim's "illness" became acute. The sister brought home Kim's report card.

Alex had enjoyed reading and discussing the stories he read ever since he started to school. His teachers uniformly commented on his interest in and insights into literature. Studying Shakespeare as a senior, however, his English mark fell and he began to make harsh comments about his course. He and his teacher talked about the change in his work. The critical factor in the situation was identified as the project Alex had been assigned: construction of shields that might be used in a *Macbeth* production. The teacher patiently explained that everyone in the class had a construction project and again pointed to the years-past projects hanging on the classroom walls.

Beth was taller than most other girls in her sixth grade class and taller, too, than all the boys. Her interests centered in music, piano lessons and school chorus. Rehearsing a new song one day, the sopranos had difficulty in reaching and holding a high note. Beth, too, missed the note. The director asked Beth to step out of the group and stand on a stool so she could have a better chance to "reach" the high note. Beth felt her world tumble in upon herself as she stood—her tallness exaggerated—a spectacle in front of her friends.

Jeff transferred to a new school and found his mathematics class far behind the pace of his previous work. His new teacher suggested that he work along with the group, using the time for review. For half a year, Jeff "reviewed" material previously encountered. His

satisfactory achievement slipped and his interest in mathematics was dulled.

The pressures of grades, instructional techniques, curriculum, and teaching tactics are relatively easy to recognize. Obvious as they are, when noticed, they are not infrequently ignored in the belief that they are "exceptions." When a school pressure affects many pupils, enough attention is focused on the problem so that the force is dissipated or redirected. This general safety valve, triggered only in excess, serves to inhibit attention to important pressures during the times the forces are increasing their fury.

Awareness of Pressures

Awareness of such pressures is accompanied by a variety of teachers' reactions indicating pressure-laden situations. "Kids have it too easy these days" is not simply an observation of the times. It represents a symptom of arrogant indifference to individual learners. From such indifference are born the fruits of intellectual deprivation and the grotesqueness of irrelevant rewards.

The humaneness commonly claimed for the school may be in danger. Upon reflection, perhaps this quality has been superficial, if existent at all. If real, as many assert, it may not long endure under the subverting influences of multiple and varied pressures on pupils. Those dramatic pressures prominent in popular discussions deserve intensive analysis and study. Even more deserving of attention are the "little" situations and the attitudes fostering neglect of the subtle pressures. Successful confrontation of these compelling and harassing situations will be recognized in terms of reduced pressures on pupils and the truly liberating influence of the school.

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