

## A View from the Center

WE ARE all affected by climate. It dictates and controls our activities in numerous ways. So it is with the educational climate in which a classroom teacher works. The educational climate affects, dictates and controls much of the educational activity of the teacher. It has subtle as well as overt powers that influence attitudes, actions and, most important, strongly affect the view the teacher has of himself.

I propose to focus on what I think is a unique educational climate, and to describe how it looks from the view of the classroom teacher, and how it affects his actions. Although this is from a personal viewpoint, the relationships and activities described here that comprise the structure of the educational climate, do exist in the district in which I teach.

What is the district? The district concerned is an elementary school district in a suburban area near a large cosmopolitan city. Each school has its own principal and is under the direct supervision of the district superintendent. The superintendent, in turn, answers to an elected school board. The district superintendent has as his immediate staff, assistant superintendents and consultants.

Where does the teacher appear in this organizational framework? In this district the classroom teacher finds himself and his pupils in a center position, supported by the superintendent, the principal, consultants, school board, and parents. Does this sound like a team? It is!

### An Eagerness To Start

Having taught in good districts, I came to my present assignment unscarred, but wary. When I was told there were consultants available to assist me, I assumed they would fulfill the traditional function of supervisors. When I received my initial orientation at a preschool get-together with an experienced teacher of the district, I expected to be "told" what procedures to follow. After several days of workshops with consultants, followed by presentations from the superintendent and a school board member, I was aware that what I was feeling was rather unique.

The total approach was more than warm acceptance. They were saying, "These are some of the things we do."

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These are the things we believe in. Perhaps you would like to try them. Perhaps you have better ways. Let us know how we can help you in your exciting task." Within this framework there comes a release, an opening up within a teacher and what follows is an eagerness to get started.

The climate is essentially one of academic freedom. The teacher is not distracted with administrative orders, or restricted with a one way method. He is the creative, artful master of his classroom and he is free to take his pupils as far as he can, knowing he has approval and can call for help along the way. It is assumed that he is competent. This implicit belief in and respect for the teacher's competency is demonstrated by everyone. Being quite human, the teacher in turn stretches up and views himself in this same light. It is a warm, relaxing, anxiety-free light that allows him to look outside himself, to move about freely and to focus more effectively on his pupils and their needs. Standing in this circle of freedom, he can reach out for tools, materials, and assistance, confident that they will be furnished.

When the teacher wants help, the district consultants are available and responsive. Generally, the only requirement is that the teacher must sign up or telephone for their services. In other words, the consultant comes on the teacher's terms and fills educational needs as the teacher sees them. They are quick to enrich with an idea, quick to pick up the teacher's enthusiasm for a project and join with him in spirit and assistance.

The role of the consultant is one of the most unique aspects of this district. It is a helping role that carries no threat to the classroom teacher. Because the teacher-consultant relationship is anxiety

free, the teacher is able more fully to utilize the consultant's services. Some of the fruits of this kind of working relationship have been the development of significant depth pilot studies in this district. The consultant's question to the teacher is, "How are things going?", rather than, "What have you done?" What does this do for the teacher? It *moves* him—in one kind of direction or another. There is no standing still when a teacher is surrounded with this kind of warm assistance.

How does the principal fit into the climate? Of course, the principal is the evaluator. Viewed from the center of the classroom, however, the principal is another important human being who makes himself available on the teacher's terms. It is his dynamic "caring about" that prompts the teacher to open the classroom and invite the principal to come in so teacher and pupils can benefit from his perceptions. The joke, the problem, the interesting experiment, are all eagerly shared with the principal in this setting because he has demonstrated a consistent readiness to become involved. He is interested in the teacher as a human being and, because of this, the teacher feels free to turn to him for support and guidance. When the principal opens the door of the classroom, he brings with him the breezes that make this refreshing climate possible.

What is important to note here is that the principal is one of many to whom the teacher can turn. There are no set procedures, no designated channels to go through to enlist aid. The guidance consultant who makes himself available during the lunch hour to soak up the problems, doubts and needs of teachers, the superintendent and other consultants who sit down for coffee after school are demonstrating an openness, a readiness

to help, a caring enough to listen. As a result of this, the teacher freely reaches out to everyone. With this kind of openness, all he has to do is figure out who can best help him in a particular situation and go directly to that person.

### A Pulling Together

Because everyone in this setting breathes the same air of acceptance, a high level of interaction takes place between teachers. Free from competitive pressures, an open flow of communication occurs. If a new method works for one, there is an eagerness to share with others. If something fails, the same sharing takes place. Because we are all viewed as competent, there is a respect for each other, a closeness, that not only eliminates lonely pursuits but results in a pulling together for group excellence.

Free from dogmatic meeting schedules, the teachers in this setting arrange most of their own meetings. As a result, one finds almost continual grade level meetings taking place within a school. We lean on each other, feed new ideas into our group, gain new perceptions. These are intrinsic actions that can only take place where there is trust. The result of these spontaneous, teacher-initiated meetings makes an interesting circular picture. Two or three teachers may sit down to discuss a common problem and then decide they could benefit from the principal's opinion and, from there, they might draw in one of the consultants, the superintendent, the nurse—whoever might add a new dimension to solve the problem.

Teachers are not only free to hold their own meetings, they also make their own decisions regarding in-service growth. By grade level and school, they are expected to evaluate their needs and

make known their wants. If members of one group feel the need of assistance in a particular area and cannot find it among themselves, they can call for help. The district offers this help readily from its own staff and pumps in new blood in the form of outside experts if such resources cannot be found within the district. This kind of encouragement puts the teacher in an active, dynamic role that prompts self-evaluation and solutions to self-needs.

What does all this have to do with excellence in teaching? It is difficult to say, since most of this approach is at the feeling level. However, since I believe that it is only at the feeling level that significant change takes place, then this is the only level that merits attention. None of what the district offers would have any value if its effects were not "felt" by the teacher. Having experienced the kind of humanism that is offered here, this close, constant inter-relationship, the teacher internalizes this warmth and carries it with him into the classroom. How can he help but look at each child with the same feeling he has experienced? When an entire district places this high priority on human importance, the teacher instinctively views each child in the same light. Having felt this depth of caring, it becomes easy for the teacher to transmit it to others.

There is also an aliveness that comes from this climate that impels the teacher continuously to look for new and better ways. It is not enough to do the same thing because it works. With breathing room provided, constant acceptance, no time limits, experts brought into the district to help, the teacher finds himself looking toward others for ideas, inspiration, and then to himself to accept, reject

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Second: "I have tremendous faith that individual schools will make adequate and dependable decisions on what they want to do and that each school will become its own broken front."

Third: "I believe that an environment that is dedicated to growth and to development of people, in which everyone is free to move, finds less resistance. When people suddenly discover they are free, they do not have to fight against things but can put their energy to the things they want to do."

I must warn you that if, after thinking these suggestions through, you should decide to try them, you are going to come up against new pressures. There are those who will want you to issue directives—they will want to know when you are going to make the district adoption, which means "When will we fixate at a certain point so we do not grow?" They will want you to emphasize homework and A B C's and phonics. Hemingway had a definition of "courage" which was: "Courage" is grace under pressure." I have a definition which says, "Courage" is poise under pressure." You are going to need a lot of poise under pressure when you begin to invest in human beings in an interesting, creative, consultative way.

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From Center—Hillman

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and improve on what he sees and hears. This freedom leads the teacher to do his own questioning. He has time to ask himself, "Where am I going? How do I intend to get there? Who and what do I need to help me?" This kind of thinking is the basis for strong curriculum planning. By not being hampered by over-direction, those of us who might be mediocre in another setting, are pulled up and made strong and independent.

With this feeling of strength comes a willingness to experiment, change, question and move without limits.

Is it easy to teach in this type of climate? No! Just as a man in business for himself works harder than an employee, a teacher in this setting strives continuously for self-improvement. Where the focus is constantly on the classroom, where the question from all sides is, "How can we help you?", the only road open is an exhilarating uphill climb. To expand and improve on your own is never easy. However, when a teacher has no need to fight elements of hierarchy, where he is a confident member of a team and valued as a person and as a teacher, he has a bank account with unlimited funds. Once addicted to this type of affluency, where he is free to draw interest in any amount, a teacher would find it difficult to tolerate a district that offered less.

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Elective Courses—Cox

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*No State-Level Authority.* Local option was reported by 14 states. In many of these states only the approval of local boards of education, local high school boards or curriculum committees was necessary for individual schools to establish new courses. Although state-level approval was not required, two states reported strong leadership at the state level when studies indicated the need for new course offerings.

Two other states published or otherwise made recommendations concerning the need for new courses. However, all such efforts were clearly of an advisory nature. While approval of a new course was not required, one state requested that a formal report of the addition of new courses be made to the Department of Education.

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