

# TO SAMPLE—OR TO EXPLORE?

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SINCE its inception the junior high school has justified its existence through the stated objective that it meets the educational needs of adolescent age students. Educators often state that in this period a special program is needed for and special help is required by the student. They hold that students at this age level, the transition from childhood to young adulthood, should, in addition to the general educational experiences, be provided an opportunity to identify their specific talents and abilities.

The junior high school student needs to explore his world. He is becoming more aware of himself as a person and is concerned with questions that have to do with himself as a person and his identity as such. He is concerned about the use that he makes of himself in attaining objectives that are important to him.

The adolescent knows that achieving adulthood is important. He is searching for ways to achieve this goal. He is interested in knowing what the adult world is like and how a feeling of being adult differs from that of being a child. He can remember what it is like to be a child and in imagination he has played at being an adult and at doing

adult things. He needs to "check out" these imaginings against reality and to find out what he is—what he is in this transition zone between childhood and adulthood. The exploratory program may provide each student an opportunity to retrace through memory the road that he has traveled, to look around himself at his present world, and to project himself into the future through imagination.

## A Search for Meaning

To make its position clear on the purpose and function of the exploratory program the National Association of Secondary-School Principals recently presented this definition:

Exploration is that function of the junior high school which provides each student a breadth of experiences that will broaden his horizons, develop his interests, and identify his attitudes, strengths, and weaknesses in vocational, educational, and avocational pursuits (1).

The meaning of exploration as defined here hinges on the word *experience*. If experience is looked upon as both an active and a passive affair, as Dewey (4) defined the term, exploration becomes a comprehensive activity. The activity becomes a well-planned,

coordinated unit within which the student does something to things and ideas and they in turn (the passive phase) do something to him. The activity becomes an experience as the student takes meaning from what is done to him. He is passively taking from the activity a meaning, a way of seeing, that affects his future behavior and becomes a guide for future action. Meaning is dependent upon both the active and passive phase of the activity.

A child puts his hand into a flame and withdraws it suddenly. The child actively does something to the flame when he puts his hand into it. He receives the action of the flame and takes from it the meaning "hot" or pain. The flame now takes on new meaning for the child. It is seen in a different way; it is something to avoid, something that can cause pain. There has been no experience, according to Dewey, unless both phases of the activity have been completed.

In the classroom or shop the active phase of the exploratory experience occurs when the student does something with or to a thing, idea, etc.; when he is pursuing an active course. The activity may be of short or long duration. The passive phase of the activity occurs when the student sees or gets the meaning of the activity—when the meaning of the thing or idea is established for the student. The passive phase occurs when the student answers for himself the question, "What does it mean for or to me?"

### **More Than Sampling**

In many school situations students are scheduled for short periods in various kinds of activities that are called

exploratory, but which are really only sampling operations. In such activities the student is given a chance to do something to things but the meaning of what the things do for him is left to chance. Anything that is learned in this type of activity is fortuitous. In such situations the activity becomes activity for activity's sake. In a sampling operation, working with the refrigeration unit may become a routine mechanical operation for the student. He would probably see only the parts of the machine and learn how to fit part with part so that the machine would function. Any learning other than what one does to the machine is left to chance.

A much more profitable operation for the student would be the opportunity to round out the process. Through the exploratory activity the student may have an opportunity to look at the machine in relation to man. Such questions as "What does refrigeration contribute to the health, welfare, comfort and happiness of people?" "What is it like becoming a refrigeration mechanic?", may be answered by the student for himself.

He needs to explore the questions: "Does this vocation offer me the opportunity to actualize my potential?" "What opportunity does this vocation offer me to gain the community status or esteem that I need?" These and other questions that the student will ask need to be explored. The student needs to find the answers both from within himself and from the responses he hears his peers make to the questions. He needs to have a significant (to him) adult help him in his search for valid answers to his questions.

Although getting into "right" courses and a "right" vocation or profession is

important, an individual's success or failure in school and in life is dependent upon other factors about which the school may do something. How one feels about himself, his way of seeing himself, is such an area. It may be that as important as native ability to the success of an individual in any vocation or profession is his feeling about himself.

### **The Self Is Important**

Each student is constantly trying himself out and taking in meanings through which he views himself. He is constantly searching for answers to such questions as "Who am I?" "What am I like?" "What things can I do well?" "How do people feel about me?" These and other questions that relate to the idea of self are pressing concerns of adolescents. Each, in his own way, and in unsupervised and often destructive ways, is constantly finding answers to these questions. The answers one finds, on his own, are quite often invalid and unsound. The answers that young people get to these questions, when they search on their own, may actually thwart self-fulfillment.

Self-exploration that leads to a knowledge of what self is like may be very productive in terms of personal satisfaction and growth. Not only may the student get insight into his own inner being but he may gain, through experience, a knowledge of the conditions conducive to self-exploration and self-discovery. This knowledge and understanding may help students find some solid footing in what Norman Cousins calls "Life Inside the Centrifuge" (3). He has the opportunity to bring his emotional knowing and his

intellectual or conceptual knowledge into congruency.

The atmosphere that is made safe for self-exploration will also be one in which what is discovered in exploration can be accepted. The accepting teacher can create an atmosphere in which the truth one finds about himself can be accepted without efforts at distortion, refutation or repudiation (2). It is in the accepting atmosphere that the student is given a chance to find that he is more than a thing with which something is done. It is in this type of atmosphere that he comes to see himself as a thinker of thoughts, a doer of deeds, a maker of decisions, a fully human person.

Acceptance of self by any individual may conserve great amounts of individual emotional and intellectual energy. If the individual is unable to accept himself he will be forced to expend undetermined amounts of time, energy and effort in defending the unacceptable facets of himself. He may, on the other hand, join a group where normally undesirable behavior is acceptable. A student is unable to devote adequate time and attention to scholarship when so much is consumed in proving to himself and his peers that he is an acceptable person.

### **Need To Explore Feelings**

Students bring to school their feelings about themselves, about others, about school and home, about adults and the adult world, about adult expectations of them and about teachers and their expectations (5). There may be feelings of hostility and resentment that are expressed in outbursts of anger or other overt, destructive behavior. They bring

to school with them their feelings of fear; fear of failure, fear of non-acceptance, and other fears. They bring their feelings of frustration and futility—the gamut of feelings with which people live. The physical expression of these emotions may take many forms from open hostility to extreme withdrawal. Although these emotions are present, students are taught, through external pressure, that only positive feelings are permitted in the classroom. "You mustn't feel that way," students are told.

The feelings that students have are there and should be looked at by them. Students need to explore these feelings, label them and discover the reason for their existence. They need to be permitted to search for acceptable ways of expressing all of the feelings they experience. In the safe atmosphere of an exploratory situation one may say, "I feel angry when . . ." and find the feeling of anger not demanding expression in destructive outbursts. They may look at their fear of failure, their fear of being disliked and find them less awesome when brought into the light of open discussion.

Feelings of fear are threatening and people who operate under a cloud of threat are unable to function in an optimum way. If students are able to deal with their fears and frustrations through verbal identification of cause and effect the energy formerly used to defend could be used to gain and maintain growth momentum.

Patterns of feeling are the stuff in which patterns of thought are rooted. Erich Fromm, in his book *May Man Prevail?*, says, "Patterns of thought are rooted in patterns of feeling . . ." (6).

Since patterns of thought and patterns of feeling seem to be so inextricably interwoven, a change in thought patterns requires a change in patterns of feeling. This change cannot occur in a vacuum nor can ignoring feelings bring about a change in them. Like any other subject matter they must be "looked at" and the meaning out of which feelings arise must be discussed and become a part of the knowledge an individual has.

As one learns to take realistic meanings from his environment, his feelings come to match reality. As this occurs the individual can afford to *be* his feelings. His anger at injustice becomes indignation, and his behavior a rational program designed to alleviate a situation that to him seems unjust. As one becomes able to accept his feelings, to experience them, he is able to function more fully, effectively and creatively (7).

### **Need To Know What One Values**

The values one holds are important. It is important that each person has opportunity, through exploration, to identify those values which he really holds and those to which lip service is given. The student needs opportunity to find out what he really values as well as what he values because others think he should. In an exploratory program, a student has opportunity to hear others express their values and their reasons for holding these values. He is placed in a position of being able to express his values and have them looked at and in the looking be able to sift out the pseudo-values from the real ones. The

student will probably find that there are values to which all of the other students give allegiance. He may find that he holds values which are common to all people with whom he relates while others are unique to small groups or just to him.

It seems important, in this age of mobility, that students become aware of the value systems of others and come to respect the different systems while maintaining their own. They may understand that certain values, such as the Golden Rule, the value of human life, honesty, truthfulness, integrity, chastity, have universal application and that becoming a fully-functioning member of society requires allegiance to these.

In a society such as ours which professes a belief in freedom, this concept needs to be explored and clarified by students. Too often in our history freedom has been seen by individuals and groups in a very selfish way. Such persons or groups have seen freedom as applying only to them. They have seen freedom as the right to deny it to others, to exercise and apply one's own prejudices, to deny privilege and rights, to demand conformity to one's own values or system. Through exploration of the meaning of freedom, students may come to see that the freedom of each is dependent upon the freedom that each other one is given.

The need to be free seems to be a part of being human. People, to be fully human, need to be free and the meaning of being human needs to be explored. The road from savagery toward full humanness has been long in terms of time and effort. People need to explore the meaning of humanness, of becom-

ing, and of being human. The understanding of the meaning of human growth and maturity is important. This kind of exploration may be a part of the humanities program.

For the economy, the technology, and the culture to remain healthy and vigorous, the uniqueness of the individual must be valued and respected. Through exploring the meaning of uniqueness, students may come to see that valuable contributions to the world of science, mathematics, technology, literature, art, etc., have been made by people because of their uniqueness; because they think differently. Yet the success of the exploratory program depends upon the complete respect for uniqueness and the right of the individual to express this uniqueness, the right to express divergent opinions and ideas. The entire exploratory program may contribute to this value which is so important to a free and open society.

### **A Time, A Place, A Group**

The gratification of the need to feel esteemed, to experience success, to feel safe in one's world will not be put off into some distant future. If the student is unable to find satisfaction of these needs in socially approved ways, he may turn to unacceptable activities in search of satisfaction. The adolescent "gang-world," for example, may become the medium through which he satisfies his needs. Power as a gang leader may be seen as a means of satisfying the esteem need. Membership in the gang may be seen as a way of satisfying the safety need, and becoming effective in the performance of gang activities may be seen as satisfying the self-fulfillment need. In the larger social scene, however, any

or all of the substitute activities become need frustrating and growth inhibiting. The struggle to satisfy these needs may become so great that all energy and every inner resource is devoted to gratifying them.

If, through exploration, students, with understanding help, can identify their strengths and competencies, they can use these as means to satisfy needs. They will be able to elect courses and select activities in which they can experience the satisfaction of accomplishment and success. They will be able to identify themselves with a group holding similar interests and abilities and gain a feeling of safety through belonging. They can gain esteem from peers and teachers and utilize their abilities and talents which need to be used.

We must not confuse sampling with exploring. In sampling we get the sensation but we may not get the meaning. We may savor the bits of food laid out on a table without understanding the meaning of the specific food for the human body. In exploring there is the search for the deeper meaning—not only for how things seem but how things *are*.

This type of exploration can provide faculties and administrators with the information they need as they strive to build programs to hold the dropouts in school and meet the needs of all students. In a free-flowing, exploratory program, students will give the school information about their needs, their talents, abilities and goals. As this information comes to the faculty, it can be used as elective courses are developed, and as activity programs are evaluated and planned. Course content may be selected and materials and methodology can be adapted to the identified

need and ability level of the student served. The exploratory program may offer the student the opportunity to explore, vicariously and in safety, the culture and ways that he would like to fit into it.

A comprehensive exploratory program, operating under optimum conditions, can give students an opportunity to find their way. It can provide them opportunity to develop a realistic view of self and a positive regard for others. It can give them an opportunity to scan the world of work and the world of values. It can provide them a time, a place and a group where they can feel emotionally safe and personally esteemed. It may be the only time in their daily lives that some students can experience this feeling.

An exploratory program may become the medium through which both student and teacher discover the means at the student's disposal for the achievement of their joint enterprise.

## References

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