

PRIORITY IN SELF-DIRECTION

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IN SOME schools, there is far more opportunity for pupils to assume leadership roles, study independently, and seek answers to their own questions than in many other schools. The teaching staff's concept of curriculum and its attitude toward experimentation and innovation would seem to influence the learning environment of the school.

The atmosphere of a school is as conspicuous and can be described as surely as can the tone or atmosphere of a classroom. One might be reluctant to say that there are certain measurable factors in a favorable school environment. Nevertheless, the careful observer can describe some principles which seem to permeate the daily life of the school population.

One can see and hear behaviors which establish the atmosphere of a school and can suggest some proposals, if not conclusions, about the cause and perpetuation of the existing environmental atmosphere.

Atmosphere for Growth

There are probably many schools throughout the country which could be described as having attributes contributing to the enhancement of pupil self-direction. One has a particularly good feeling, for example, about what is happening to boys and girls when he visits the Oxford Elementary School in Dearborn, Michigan.

The halls are not very quiet as the pupils rush in to their morning classes. There is the usual pulling and tugging at one another, but bits of conversation seem almost immediately to change one's perception and, in a way, to describe what happens to boys and girls when a staff places a high priority on pupil self-direction.

"Hey, Johnny, I think I will go to the library this morning and finish my report when the teacher is working with some of the kids on map reading."

"Mary, why don't you play your French lesson at the listening post this afternoon while I help the librarian check books out? Then we can go home together."



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Staff and students participate in planning learning activities.

"I know we are supposed to play soccer today, Jim, but this is the beginning of basketball season, and you know, our gym teacher might change his mind if we talk with him."

Certainly these are selected but not untypical pupil conversations at Oxford. Consider some recent activities in the school:

- Visitation and involvement of parents in a culminating social studies experience
- A multi-text approach in social studies with a systematic effort to individualize instruction in skill development
- A school-sponsored Book Fair in which twelve parents assumed major responsibility
- Faculty committees on science, modern math, assembly, library, safety, A-V, and a playground committee with representation from the students, custodial staff and nurses
- A portion of the staff volunteering to hold parent conferences at night to permit both mothers and fathers to attend
- A staff request that the Central Office provide some technical assistance in the development of a research project
- The librarian securing a small carpet for the kindergarten children to use while listening and learning about the library.

Involvement

Evident in the activities at Oxford is the assumption that pupils are the foci of the educational process and therefore should be intimately involved. Contribu-

tions to the planning of learning activities, representation on several building committees, and participation in many leadership roles are included in this involvement. Participation of parents is not overlooked; indeed they are welcomed and are asked to assume responsibility. One has the feeling that the atmosphere and orientation are very human, and the development of pupil self-direction is of prime importance.

Such an atmosphere and priority of purpose are fostered by a staff with a strong commitment to boys and girls. Yet, what members of the staff believe about education and the way in which they behave toward one another seem equally basic in explaining the effectiveness of a faculty.

In a setting such as Oxford the affairs of the school are characterized by pupil involvement. Too often in our educational programs pupils are assigned merely passive roles which really do not permit effective learning opportunities. And the effective staff is closely identified with an active program for improvement. How staff members feel and behave toward one another in the day-to-day activities of the school certainly must have a positive effect on the kind and quality of opportunities provided the pupils. There are more specific judgments which might be made about a staff which seems to encourage pupil self-direction.

The total education of the child is the business of all teachers. The reality of



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Pupils are involved in an active program.

increased subject matter specialization and the addition of specialized service personnel such as speech correctionists, guidance workers, and visiting teachers is perceived not as a means of abrogating responsibility. Quite to the contrary, teachers welcome such assistance as a complementary strength in program development.

Program improvement is dependent upon teacher experimentation. The very nature of experimentation guarantees only that an approach, method or technique will be different; success is hypothecated, not assured. Teachers are free to experiment for program improvement and are prepared to redirect their efforts should experimentation not succeed. Failures and mistakes are data for evaluation; they are not the bases for censorship.

Too often individual teacher or even building experimentation is inhibited, possibly eliminated altogether, because someone in the central office or another authority agency insists that the project be researched with all the proper controls and statistical analyses. Certainly, exacting research is important but it tends to jeopardize initiative when imposed without enthusiastic support of the teacher who is burdened enough with the innovation itself. Similarly, however, innovation in the form of a new "bag of tricks" is hardly experimentation.

Freedom to experiment implies a professional commitment to develop, possibly quite informally, evaluative procedures which can be examined and shared. And, implicit in such inquiry is the freedom to make professional judgments to retain



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that which over the years has been and continues to be successful. Newness is not a satisfactory criterion for success.

Extremely important in a school which encourages experimentation and innovation is staff cohesiveness. Teachers have a professional and human responsibility to communicate and to support one another in program improvement. In part, support is demonstrated by protecting the innovator from rather well established norms which might tend to militate against innovation.

Priorities

Establishing and reestablishing priorities in the curriculum are paramount in the activities of the staff. Experimentation, innovation, and evaluation stimulate and enhance change. An innovative staff systematically examines and proposes curriculum priorities as a natural, on-going part of curriculum improvement.

Parents and other interested citizens are included, not as casual observers, but as active participants in the educational enterprise. Their contribution is important at home and can be at school. Furthermore, too many staffs have suffered disappointment in having to withdraw program improvements because of citizen reaction. An uninformed or misinformed citizenry in a day when education is equated with future success cannot long be expected to give needed support.

Characteristic of the beliefs of a school staff which encourages experimentation and innovation is a continuing faith in the competence and dignity of each staff member. Each recognizes that he can be most creative by extending himself in his unique way. The administrator and, indeed, all members of the staff, are quite aware that freedom of inquiry and experimentation will not maintain the status quo. And, mistakes will be made. Mutual examination of innovation may very well result in redirecting the innovator; it need not, indeed it should not, inhibit the development of further inquiry.

An enthusiastic teaching staff involved in trying out new ideas within a well developed program and a school atmosphere which provides opportunities for pupils to demonstrate self-direction seem to be found in the same building. Once developed, each seems to enhance and perpetuate the other.

Our effective school staffs must hold similar, if not common, beliefs about how people grow and improve themselves, about the importance of study and inquiry, and about the kind and quality of opportunities needed to develop pupil self-direction.

When these beliefs are manifested in obviously describable behaviors in the daily life of the school, it would seem that far more schools could be providing opportunities for pupils to increase their self-direction. Certainly, there are enough clues for curriculum workers to make even greater efforts than we have made thus far. ☛

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