

SOURCE OF SELF-DIRECTION

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FROM WHENCE comes self-direction? Is there a college course to teach self-direction? Does self-direction arise when a student knows lots of subject matter? Will self-direction develop among children who are left to their own devices much of the time? Is self-direction a good thing in school? What teacher mannerisms are conducive to the development of desirable self-direction among students? Are some teachers devoid of the necessary understandings for helping students learn self-direction? Are there some teachers who just simply cannot stand signs of self-direction in their classrooms?

A teacher's actions or manner can influence a pupil in the development of self-direction in a variety of ways. Children can be denied opportunities in self-direction, be misguided in that self-direction becomes no-direction, learn self-direction through mechanized parliamentary procedure, or through planning, design, structure and example really become comfortable in self-direction for self and others at the same time. Often, things that just emerge from our memories serve as illustrations of the concept being sought.

To paraphrase a comment by Laura Zirbes, we might say:

"My children have no talent for self-direction so I must tell them just what to do all the time; or is it the truth of the matter that the teacher in the instance regularly tells the children what to do so thoroughly there is no need for self-direction and, in fact, resentment if it sneaks in?"

Witness the excited and enthusiastic child who literally tumbles into the classroom with an insight, new to him and probably to his peers, about how an acorn bursts and starts a new oak tree, and can he start one growing in the science corner. The fact that there is a science corner says, "Fine, let's all watch the growth." Where there is no science corner, the teacher would probably stifle self-direction with a comment about how they did that once before and it didn't work.

Do you remember the American Government teacher who asked a long and involved question and, even if you started to answer it, he would interrupt you and answer it himself? Then there was the junior high Health teacher who permitted students to answer questions but inevitably would say, "Well,

that's partly right," and continue with some additional data. In either case, the students soon learned to refrain from responding, which, in effect, suppressed self-direction in the classroom.

Each of us would probably claim to be the teacher who releases pupils to release ideas. This is the teacher who has a talent for probing beneath and beyond the issue introduced to the point where the pupil's idea is suddenly three times as powerful and he thinks he developed it all by himself.

An old-time institute speaker used the phrase that, what you will become you are now becoming. How true this is for children in particular as they become what their parents are, what the teachers are, what the policemen are, what the band director is; all this becomes fused and sometimes confused. Certainly, children do not analyze their

own level of self-direction and we cannot get away from the fact that they become what we exhibit in our behavior. They imitate us and react to us on the basis of how best to satisfy their needs.

Clues and Cues

In reacting to us, pupils respond to clues and cues. Some clues and cues are interpreted alike by all children in the room and others are interpreted differently because of a strong home implication related to a specific event or instance.

Pupils are making judgments all day long as they try to decide what the teacher means by a shake, a bow, or nod of the head. Does teacher really mean it when she threatens isolation, failure or physical punishment? Does she speak softly, loudly or with clenched hands when she is disturbed?

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Even some of the cues are sound effects which need analysis, the ringing bell, a whistle, clapping hands, or snapping fingers.

How many ways does a teacher express approval or disapproval? Gestures, smiles, sighs, gasps, grimaces, and pats on the back at different levels of elevation are all significant in the sensitive and interactive setting of the classroom. There are more variables than we can comprehend in the combinations of teacher, pupils, and clues, but today's teachers are involved in refined teaching techniques which give pupils more choices in both semi-structured and structured settings.

Better Days

Sketchy reference to the kinds of behavior assigned to teachers in instances where educational lag is at a minimum will help us see that there are research efforts aimed at helping pupils develop their self-direction.

In Programmed Learning the role of the teacher may seem so restricting to him that he feels a frustration in the search for his own self-direction. He can sense during initial experience with programmed materials some of the restraints pupils have too often felt in the teacher-dominated classroom.

In Richard Suchman's Inquiry Training,¹ the teacher again finds himself in a role prescribed by the nature and purpose of the procedure. It is true that he can pervert the intent of the system and conduct inquiry training sessions in name only, but those who have been properly oriented know what it feels

¹ Dr. J. Richard Suchman, Illinois Studies in Inquiry Training, 805 West Pennsylvania, Urbana, Illinois.

like to let pupils determine the direction of their own search for solutions to problems.

In Dr. Flanders' ² analyses of what goes on in teachers' classrooms, we can see from transcriptions the imbalance among teacher-dominated and pupil-directed activities. Just the opportunity for a teacher to study his own classroom behavior through the frequency of occurrence of the numbered activities makes him aware of the lack of pupil self-direction.

Field trips, neighborhood interviews, and the current emphasis on making science classes truly laboratory centered are among teacher-guided learning situations in which pupils experience varying degrees of self-direction. Even the evolving of Dr. Glasser's "Reality Therapy," ³ in which teachers are invited to share the therapist's role, holds promise of better days for thoughtful self-direction among all learners.

Through the Years

Ideas and directions about self-direction have been shuffled, sifted and scheduled in *Educational Leadership* down through the years. Not in nice compact chapters, not even in the use of the phrase self-direction. Yet, out of the last six years one can select a series of articles to reread for the heart of self-direction which is always involved in how teachers work with learners. For example: Look back to what Roy Patrick Wahle called "Marks of In-

² N. A. Flanders. "Analyzing Teacher Behavior." *Educational Leadership* 10: 173; December 1961.

³ Dr. William Glasser. "Reality Therapy, a New Approach to Psychiatry." New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965.

dividualization."⁴ Among ten mentioned are: attention is directed to the exceptional; a class is a group of separate human beings; guidance nourishes curriculum and curriculum serves guidance.

Now read the principles and purposes of grouping suggested by Mildred Ellisor in "Ways of Working with Learners."⁵ Here we see such personal purposes as providing more and varied opportunity for each person to participate, giving students an opportunity to pursue special interests, and gathering and organizing data pertinent to the solution of a problem.

Review what Robert W. Scofield calls "A Creative Climate."⁶ Among seven suggestions to help pupils discover freedom of inquiry, to become creative, there are two which call for special attention; one permits varying approaches to subject matter and the other encourages tentative conclusions aimed toward the final exhilaration of solving problems alone.

Re-experience Muriel Crosby's vivid word picture in "A Portrait of Blight,"⁷ where she says such things as: ". . . many disadvantaged children are the victims of a poverty so crushing that early in life poor health not only drains the energy, but blights the spirit." Here,

⁴ Roy Patrick Wahle. "Methods of Individualization in Elementary School." *Educational Leadership* 2: 75; November 1959.

⁵ Mildred Ellisor. "Ways of Working with Learners." *Educational Leadership* 7: 428; April 1960.

⁶ Robert W. Scofield. "A Creative Climate." *Educational Leadership* 18: 5; October 1960.

⁷ Muriel Crosby. "A Portrait of Blight." *Educational Leadership* 20: 300; February 1963.

the teacher is helpless alone to guide a child to self-direction without rooting each child's curriculum in his own perception of his own needs.

Turn to Richard Foster's description of "A Climate for Self-Improvement."⁸ Here the emphasis is on those who create the climate for new involvements, new interactions, new experiences and new perceptions.

Search out Arthur Combs' article on "The Personal Approach to Good Teaching,"⁹ in which he develops a system of perceptual organizations which would help any teacher create a desirable climate for self-direction.

Add to these samples of literature Harold Drummond's editorial on "Growing Up in America,"¹⁰ Margaret Ammons' "Purpose and Program,"¹¹ and Earl Kelley's "The Place of Affective Learning."¹² Fortunately for children, the ASCD journal, *Educational Leadership*, has over the years kept before us the elements of perception and behavior which when respected by teachers are lived by teachers as they prepare an environment for pupil self-direction. ← §

⁸ Richard L. Foster. "A Climate for Self-Improvement." *Educational Leadership* 21: 275; February 1964.

⁹ Arthur W. Combs. "The Personal Approach to Good Teaching." *Educational Leadership* 21: 369; March 1964.

¹⁰ Harold D. Drummond. "Growing Up in America." *Educational Leadership* 21: 419; April 1964.

¹¹ Margaret Ammons. "Purpose and Program." *Educational Leadership* 22: 15; October 1964.

¹² Earl C. Kelley. "The Place of Affective Learning." *Educational Leadership* 22: 455; April 1965.

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