

# THE PRINCIPAL INFLUENCES LEARNING

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The clearest way to stifle, block and destroy the self of the individual is to minimize his own way of seeing concrete living situations, his own way of searching for harmony and positiveness in relationships. . . . We must begin with the person as he is and nurture every expression of his real self.<sup>1</sup>

THE WAY a teacher feels about himself affects the boys and girls in his classroom. The way a teacher feels about himself is influenced by the reactions of his students and professional colleagues. How does the principal function to help a teacher grow in self-esteem, and in turn to affect pupil behavior?

## Teacher Self-Image

There appear to be at least four essential qualities necessary in developing working, growing relationships with staff. Hopefully these values might transfer from the teacher to the learner.

First let us rise above the suspicious judgment that most teachers are inadequately prepared, lacking in knowledge and, more basically, that they do not

<sup>1</sup> Clark Moustakas. *The Alive and Growing Teacher*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959.

teach as we taught or the way we believe teachers should teach. Call this value *trust*.

The principal indicates by his behavior that his teachers are capable of making wise judgments, that they do know or are willing to learn about the curriculum and that they may have some interesting techniques or methods that are different, new to us, yet effective for them.

The second human need we call *respect*. The respect for an individual's rights in a free society, as well as respect for his uniqueness and worth as a human being are inherent in building communication channels that ultimately reach boys and girls in a school environment.

How often do we remind teachers to be aware of and concerned about the individual differences in the classroom? We urge them to support creativity, to allow for divergent thinking—and then why do we bristle when they disagree with our introduction of a new curriculum practice?

*Encouragement* might be the third quality important in developing a positive attitude in teachers. How often do

we say, "Go ahead and try it!", or "I enjoyed your reading lesson today; perhaps you would share the idea with the staff."

Nothing grows in a vacuum or without nurture. We might reflect on how long it has been since we have been complimented for a job well done.

Finally, after we trust, respect and encourage our staff it seems sensible to enjoy these people. Sincere interest in people and their lives is a personal experience that is valuable and enriching for oneself.

### Building Tone

Listen to the school custodians and the mail delivery man if you want to know what your school image is really like. The "tone" or feeling that exists in a school building is probably a direct reflection of the values and beliefs of the administrator of that building.

Buildings seem to be either child-centered, teacher-centered or policy-oriented. One might hope to create a building atmosphere in which children and teachers are happy with a limited number of policies; with the existing policies emerging out of needs identified by pupils and teachers.

Let us examine what some of our common goals are for children and how our practice might belie our stated belief.

No one would deny that a sincere desire of all educators is to *have all children come to school eagerly or at least willingly*. Why then do we post ourselves at doors in the role of military sergeants to insure that they do not hop, skip, sing or whistle in the halls?

Following this practice leads into the sacred cow we call "bell work" that de-

nies children an opportunity to communicate or share their experiences with their friends. In contradiction to this, we support the idea that one of our basic educational goals is to *give youngsters an opportunity to develop social skills*.

The school is the institution established to assure the continuance of democracy by helping the young acquire the common values, ideals, sensitivities and behaviors needed for social living.<sup>2</sup>

Yet why do we so often deny the young a chance to practice these skills and values?

*Citizenship education* is so old that we often take for granted its implementation. When boys and girls get really involved in the running of the school, however, do we back off in fear that they might "take over"?

How does a principal function who steadfastly clings to the values cited here?

Perhaps there are one or two simple and obvious things that help to create a tone that decreases hostile feelings and responses by teachers and pupils. Steering committees that actually function often produce ideas that are workable and democratic providing they meet without principal domination and control. If the trust-respect quality shows in you, this generally has a reciprocal effect. People are not by nature "anti" things without reason.

We need also to recognize what is acceptable behavior in our school. We cannot be so naive that we can benignly overlook pushing, fighting, and name

<sup>2</sup>Edna Ambrose and Alice Miel. *Children's Social Learning*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1958.

calling in the name of "just being children." Teachers need support as evaluators and diagnosticians of good and bad behavior. In-service help can be called upon to deal with the whole area of discipline; related professional books can be located in the coffee room; staff meeting time can be devoted to "our problem," with the steering committee chairman leading the discussion.

Let us believe that teachers have integrity and that they want to grow toward more mature problem-solving skills. Perhaps they may need to try even a "bad" idea, if they are willing and able to evaluate honestly what it is doing to the boys and girls in their classrooms.

Then at times, we must dig in and do some real *work* ourselves. Boys and girls can plant and care for a flower garden which would enhance their school and we might wield the spade and hoe with them to show that we believe this is a worthwhile endeavor.

The team approach to learning provides an opportunity to offer your own talents to a receptive teacher. Rewards are manifold. You are actively involved with the boys and girls, and you make a worthwhile contribution to teaching.

It would follow that boys and girls confronted with a problem might feel differently sitting by our desk if they knew us as a "rock-hound," a coin-collector, or a reader of humorous verse. Then the door to communication, as well as the door to the office, might be opened less fearfully.

We have long known that when we communicate with one child in either positive or negative ways the word is out! Children carry the message effectively and afar. Certainly our involve-

ment with them in digging the garden bed or working in the classroom will make a difference.

How exciting to have a sixth grade boy burst into the office red-faced and perspiring and exclaim, "Hey, they're not letting us use the playground to play football and you've got to help us."

## The Curriculum

Finally, the behavior and attitude of the principal in relation to curriculum certainly have an effect on the environment children and teachers live in daily.

How long has it been since you examined your philosophy of teaching and learning? How have you evaluated this philosophy in the light of current research and changing patterns of soci-

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ety? Where do technology, urbanization, population explosion, or civil rights fit into your educational goals and ideals?

As educational leaders we must be able to talk with our staff about trends and issues. We must have discriminatory powers cooperatively to select what seems right for and what is needed by the youth in our own school community. We must be ready and willing to supply materials and human resources that will implement the kind of program the children and staff believe is important.

Supervisors, consultants, counselors and a host of specialists are becoming available to us in the schools. We must believe that their special skills and knowledge have value for the varied needs of our school population. We must view these people as part of the team and not be threatened by their different practices as in any way diminishing our own role.

It is not only the knowing and believing but the doing something about it that is crucial. Providing school time for a staff to do some professional reading, discussing and planning can contribute to curriculum exploration. Make this released time and the idea will have greater reception. Provide substitutes to free a few teachers to make professional visits in other school districts. Share what they observe and consider their recommendations to change a part of the present program.

We should use the living data gathered in our own buildings as evidence

of the goodness or wrongness of our present practices.

If, for example, our own students are not learning from and enjoying our social studies program, it should be re-evaluated. Should we "raise our standards" because all boys and girls are passing our mathematics program? Let us look at what kinds of learning take place when children themselves share in the planning. Children reveal openly and willingly what they do and do not like about school and their subjects. Consult them and weigh their observations carefully.

If principal behavior does not influence pupil environment for the better, then a valuable opportunity is lost. The first thing that all educational leaders should want is to make a difference in the educational growth of boys and girls. Too often in the daily maze of dealing with the boiler, writing requisitions and tending to the surveys and inventories from the central office we can rationalize our way out of being anything more than a high-priced clerk.

In summary, our greatest emphasis has been on the "building tone," though teacher self-image has become a number one consideration. The attitude and behavior of children in our school buildings is a direct reflection of the personalities with which they are living and working daily.

A sound school program can only be an outgrowth of a happy, unthreatened, yet purposeful group of people working together in an atmosphere of warmth and respect for one another. ☛

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