DEVIANCY OR DRY ROT
IN THE CLASSROOM?

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BY TRADITION, teachers and students at every grade level are barely tolerant of one another. Today the student who does his homework, who spends some time in the school library, and who combs his neatly cut hair will experience little difficulty in the classroom.

Today's learner, like Ken Keniston's Inburn, is one to whom things are done rather than one who does. If he becomes too active or gives way to self-expression, and especially if he deviates, he will run the risk of the teacher's condemnation, assignment to the detention room, failure, and even expulsion. The school's heavy emphasis on norms and constraints rather than on variance and freedom for individual growth and expression threatens insult and injury to every student and further strains taut classroom relationships.

What makes the expressive deviant (positive or negative) so incomprehensible and unacceptable to the school authorities? Why do these same authorities appear as enemies to the student? Why are the young learners so indifferent to the help extended to them?

Working abroad on the problems of delinquent and inadapted youth in such countries as France, Turkey, Poland and Czechoslovakia, I was frequently forced to consider the problem of the people's tolerance (or intolerance) of deviant behavior. In all countries, the tolerance level for deviancy—particularly within the official community, including judges, police, principals and teachers—seems rapidly to be approaching a dangerous low. This is especially true in the "eastern democracies"; and little by little it is establishing "record lows" in our American schools and communities.

It does not take much of a deviation to get one kicked out of school or arrested on the street. In Cairo, you can be summoned to juvenile court for picking up a cigarette from a gutter; in Chicago, you can be arrested for hanging around a street corner; and in Unionville, Pennsylvania, you can be barred from school for wearing long hair, even though you may be a National Merit Scholar. We need to inquire: "What are the forces at work that tend to increase or lower adult irritability to deviancy?"
Recently a study was made of the values of youth, teachers and parents in five communities. This study was conducted by the Lincoln Filene Center, Tufts University, in cooperation with the New England School Development Council. Three significant trends were noted: (a) the greatest value gap or highest irritability to deviance was found on the dimension of personal appearance (dress, coiffure, make-up); (b) teachers, though significantly apart from their students generally, were closer to their pupils than were parents; and (c) students, parents and teachers all valued education highly, but the students complained bitterly of the school as a place of boredom.

Significant differences in values between youth and adults were also noted. These differences lay in the areas of social behavior, morality, rules and regulations, and academic behavior; but none of these differences approached the wide gap found in the area of appearance. Parents and teachers are more irritated by the way their youngsters look than by the way they behave. By waging the major battle around deviations in personal appearance, adults will achieve (if they can win) an insignificant victory. Teachers and parents need to conserve and marshal their energies for the more significant struggle in the areas of social and personal behavior involving education, social consciousness, self-realization and morality.

It is promising that teachers generally showed higher frustration tolerance of deviancy than did the parents. Better trained and more objective than the parents, they are in a position to understand and assist deviant youth. But this will not be easy, since teachers, like parents, were widely separated from their students.

Suppression of deviancy and innovation leads inevitably to dullness and apathy in the classroom. Here is an even greater hazard to teacher and students. With very few exceptions, pedagogic experiments distinguished by the quality of novelty, even radicalism, always appear to succeed in the classroom—at least "at the one percent level." Apparently the refreshing intrusion of such innovations as classroom aides, team teaching, programmed learning, language labs, ungraded classrooms, audiovisual aids, and role playing generally succeeds, perhaps chiefly because these represent departures and deviations from the pedestrian humdrumness of the regular classroom.

We need to stimulate students by purging the familiar and the jejune materials and methods which bore the young into a stupor or drive them to drop out of school. We must encourage teachers as well as pupils to radical behavior. One cannot be radical without becoming active. If there are no new worlds to conquer and if there is nothing left to be radical about, then we will be forced to face some unhealthy alternatives: passivity, apathy and alienation. I am sorry to say that most principals I know seem to prefer to adjust to this trilogy rather than to cope with deviancy and innovation.

Schools should encourage deviation and innovation by meeting individual differences. How often have we heard this phrase in our teaching careers, and how long have we ignored it? Instead of meeting individual differences, most schools have just about succeeded in eliminating them. The most common and effective
practice, of course, is simply to eliminate the deviant himself via "educational means" (special classes) or "noneducational means" (pushing him out).

We are already living and working in dull classrooms in a dull old world (Look at your colleagues around you!) as we read the same best-sellers, live in the same apartments and houses, drive the same cars, laugh at the same jokes, wear the same hair-dos, eat the same pre-prepared meals, look at the same TV programs, speak the same grammar, and hum the same hit tunes. Thus none will be estranged, for none will be deviating, and all of us will die slowly of dry rot.

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