

X INSTITUTIONS y with PURPOSES

DALE V. ALAM *

December 10, 1968

Dear Professor:

I hope you are doing well. I am still here. I am still just as dismal as before. Today I was asked not to talk with a certain group of students any more. The reason seems to be that the questions of these students are viewed as embarrassing rather than challenging. Because we don't have answers and are unwilling to search, the questions are embarrassing to the institution—so the decision is made to ignore them and perhaps they will go away.

My meetings with these students have dealt primarily with student-teacher relations in the school. Our intent was to look at our school in relation to our society and we had hoped to prepare some material for the school newspaper, but I'm sure that's off for the present. We are really stifling these kids. I have much more faith today in the young people than I do in insecure teachers and administrators, but I have a deep fear that these students will become the same way.

In this same "conference" it was mentioned that I should realize that I can be replaced at any time. I'm sure they are searching for a "qualified" math teacher right now.

Well, enough for now—have a fine holiday season.

Yours sincerely,
Jim

January 2, 1969

Dear Professor:

Would you believe I don't have a math job any more in my school. The counselor informed me two days before Christmas holidays. He told

me I could continue here in the city as a substitute, which is what I am doing, since my assignment will allow me to remain here in the inner-city. The counselor asked me not to tell the students, but I did on my last day.

You could not believe the students' reactions. They put a sign up in the hall stating, "Mr. S. is the greatest teacher ever." The principal didn't even say good-bye though some of the teachers did. To top this, the principal, I hear, had called the president of the P.T.A. along with several other mothers to inform them of the "technicality" of my dismissal. A parent called and wants to attempt to organize and get me back in, which suits me; but, I have little hope that this could ever happen.

I'll hang on here as a substitute until I make a decision. I have written a professor about working in Appalachia and a friend in Chicago about work to help in a housing development.

I really don't think I did that much to frighten these people, but I realize now how insecure they are. Maybe I'm wrong, but I believe in the things I am doing. I'd rather practice them than be a phoney.

If you have time, since I have some now, I would like to come down sometime and talk with you. I weep for these kids. I see so clearly what they are going through and there are so many things we could be doing to help.

If I don't see you, I'll let you know if I leave the area.

Sincerely,
Jim

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THESE LETTERS from a former student, who is now a teacher, prompted the writing of the article that follows.

Just as the medical profession is currently facing the problem of system rejection of organ transplants, educators face a similar problem of system rejection as vital transplants occur. Medical researchers may be dealing with a natural phenomenon, but there is doubt that the educator's dilemma can be so simply described. Yet, almost daily one hears of teachers and principals who are being rejected by static systems. To avoid judgments, it might be suggested that these rejected educators are enough different from the system to pose a threat. Just as schools do not seem to be big enough for all kinds of learners, the schools seem equally unwilling to accept teachers who are different.

With complete understanding that linear models hold limited possibilities, it seems reasonable to develop one to help analyze the dilemma. Placing learning theory extremes into a linear model we have:

S-R Organismic

A part of the teacher education program is to study the extremes so a teacher understands learning theory; yet seldom can a teacher answer the question of how people learn. A teacher who does understand the learning process and applies these principles to the classroom is often the teacher who is rejected by a system because few schools reflect a learning base.

To answer the question of how people learn, the same linear model can be applied by adding two words to represent learning from the learner's perceptions.

S-R Organismic
Meaningless Meaningful

If the learner perceives the learning experience as meaningless, then it is obvious which learning theory should be applied. The question now becomes one of importance rather than theory. How important is it that the learner get this today? The teacher makes the decision in terms of his philosophy, experience, perceptions, and assessment of the

situation. If he decides to use S-R, then perhaps the theory should be applied more effectively and literally and the student should be deprived of his lunch or given an electric shock when undesired behaviors are elicited. This sounds terrible to teachers—"Who is ever going to do a thing like that!"—"Teachers can't treat children as though they were animals."

The option that seems more acceptable by schools is to allow the child to meet his physical needs by giving him lunch and physical comfort and to deprive him of meeting his psychological needs. The teacher can convince the learner that he is unable, unwanted, and undesirable. This we do all too frequently in the name of education. We seem to understand control much better than learning. Ask a group of teachers whether grades reflect learning or work. Look at your school and identify the learning base and compare that with the work base.

Motivational concepts, when placed on the same linear model, can best be expressed through the eyes of the teacher rather than the learner.

S-R Organismic
Meaningless Meaningful
External Internal

The external simply is the teacher's effort to control. This is how we *make* people learn. In all probability this is not student motivation. Student motivation would be near the other extreme; but many still believe that the teacher motivates, so the external concept is understood by teachers.

At this point we may be able to examine the educator's dilemma. Adding two symbols to the continuum should give us something to place our systems on the model.

S-R Organismic
Meaningless Meaningful
External Internal
X Y

It can be generalized that schools as institutions operate at the X level, yet we have Y purposes for the schools. We advocate the development of a rational man, a critical thinker, a knowledgeable man, a per-

son who understands himself, a man who feels good about himself. Yet we attempt to implement Y purposes in our X systems. Y teachers and principals are generally rejected by X systems.

Schools Are Not Alone

Schools are not alone in facing this dilemma. The family as a unit has a strong X base. The American family has long been confused by the fact that the adolescent begins to drift away from the family unit. This has been explained as a natural phenomenon—the child moves from the family to the peer group—this is very natural. Parents feel better once they understand this. Parents do not seem to understand the learning base either, and the X family reaches a time when control methods are ineffective and they just do not know what to do to control the child.

Most churches are X institutions also. The base is one of control, though here it is much more subtle. Yet many people attend church because they want their children to have the church experience. The strong social institutions of our society tend to be X institutions with Y purposes and we have problems. The tenets of the democratic society are Y tenets and we continue to implement these through X institutions. How long can this continue?

Undoubtedly one of the most exciting things occurring in schools today is a new way of viewing change. Many schools today are beginning to work out methods of avoiding system rejection by opening the system and allowing the teacher the freedom to be responsible for his own behavior. In these schools the teacher is not required to be an extension of a principal. For example, the

McDonald Middle School in East Lansing, Michigan, no longer requires all teachers to give grades. Teachers are responsible for evaluation, but may or may not send home grades. The evaluation period may or may not be each nine weeks. The responsibility for evaluation rests with the teacher. Several teachers immediately began to view evaluation differently and learners have become involved in setting personal and group objectives prior to an instructional unit. At some determined point during the unit experience, the learners write letters home to their parents. These letters are self-evaluation letters based on the personal and group objectives. The teacher reads and signs the letter and comments if he wishes.

The placing of responsibility with the teacher contains Y concepts of freedom and responsibility and enables the teacher to translate these concepts into classroom experiences.

The traditional grading system of schools has an X base and serves as one example of a barrier that perpetuates the X system and discourages the implementation of Y purposes. Grades dictate content and method and inhibit—rather than free—learning and teaching. Traditional attempts to change through consensus have failed, and the McDonald Middle School method of opening a school by placing the responsibility with the teacher has great merit today and should help us develop new change and dissemination models.

Just as we have Y purposes for *learners* in our schools, we must have Y purposes for *teachers*. Educational leaders must reflect Y beliefs and help support teachers who attempt to translate these beliefs into opportunities for vital learning experiences. □



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