

What Do They Want?

Neil P. Atkins

ACCOUNTS of student picket lines, sit-ins, walkouts, take-overs, and other disruptive tactics have become familiar newspaper copy. Popular and professional periodicals are fat with observations, descriptions, and analyses of the growing restiveness among students at all levels. The central question is, "How should the school respond?"

On any school staff one can identify several positions on this question. Many teachers feel they should merely be observers of the scene; they urge detachment and neutrality. "The kids will grow out of it," they say.

Others argue that the staff should support the protest; maybe not on all issues and surely not the more uncouth manifestations, but they are sympathetic to many of the causes. They believe teachers should be right in there with the students.

Still others—perhaps a majority, I really don't know—want to be counted among the squelchers. "Clamp down on them," this group says, "let's have none of this kooky nonsense around this school. Students must learn that they have to conform or take the consequences."

Then there are some faculty members who feel very strongly that what the students are rebelling against, needs to be rebelled against; and they believe the school should capitalize on the situation and lead the students in their efforts to reexamine the purposes of their educational experience.

The trouble is, of course, that these are all personal predilections based upon the philosophical, educational, and social orientation of each staff member. The school as an institution appears to be paralyzed by its own institutionalization. It seems to have no alternative to offer except the status quo, or some minor variation of the status quo. Thus the school is ripe for revolt, and repressive measures to keep the lid on will be futile in the long run. Yet, on the other hand, we keep telling each other, "We can't let the kids take over the schools completely."

If we ever needed competent and effective instructional leadership in the schools, now is most assuredly the time. The root of the problem is not that the teachers are militant, indifferent, and irresponsible; nor that the administrators are insensitive, incompetent, and weak-kneed; nor that the parents are apathetic, demoralized, and unreasonable; nor that the

school boards are suspicious, meddling, and provincial. The root of the problem is that education, as it is presented today, is largely meaningless to the great majority of students. The school will not be able adequately to treat even the symptoms of student unrest unless *instructional*, as contrasted to purely *managerial*, leadership is exerted to get at the educational problems.

Chilling Messages

The question, "Why is school meaningless to so many students?" is easy to ask and hard to answer if we insist upon analysis rather than exhortation and on action rather than rhetoric. Unquestionably, the best data source is the student. It is fashionable these days to say we must listen to the students.

However, we lack the skills to analyze what we hear, to refrain from being put off by the choice of words used or the examples chosen or the attitude displayed by the students. Furthermore, we don't know how to read either aggressive or apathetic student behavior for the message it conveys; we react to the mode of expression only. We need to learn how to apply our professional knowledge and our maturity of judgment to these data in order to transform them into useful input for instructional planning.

So far the students have communicated at least three messages through their newfound modes of verbal and nonverbal behavior. The content of school programs is so removed from what is real that the student has given it up as a source of learning how to use what knowledge he is acquiring for any purpose he can understand. Through the accumulation of experience with adults in the school, the student has decided that school is not a place where he can get any help in understanding problems or making personal choices which have a pertinent and present meaning to him. By its institutional rituals and organizational behavior, the school demonstrates to the student that learning, when it takes place in school, is not only passive but pallid.

These are chilling messages. Nevertheless, the school is apparently losing its meaning for many students. Perhaps this is true because the school has faltered in acknowledging the need for personal interaction of both learners and teachers with ideas in the pursuit of ways to exercise intelligent action. School experience, at least as students see it, is failing to provide what they need most—*meaningful human encounter*. When they speak of participation, they are not referring to superficial, mickey mouse activity; they ask for continuing involvement in the decisions which affect not only the kind of learning they need, but also the kind of person they aspire to become.

Meaningful Human Encounter

What will happen if the school responds to these messages by viewing student disenchantment as a reason for reexamining instructional and institutional assumptions and the procedures which are based upon them? From the meager evidence available, we can expect that in-service priorities will go to sensitizing staff members to the effect of their own behavior upon student attitude toward learning; student performance will replace

content coverage as the center of attention; curriculum decisions will tend to be more collegial than unilateral; learning materials will become more diversified both in number and mode; organizational changes will follow instructional requirements rather than vice versa; institutional restraints will begin to become less rigid; and instruction will become more individualized.

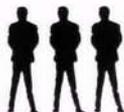
At the same time, it also may be predicted that students will become less apathetic; indeed at first it may appear that unrest is on the rise, especially if unrest is equated with involvement, questioning, and increased student participation. Teachers will become more dissatisfied with the way the school is run; they will also become more dissatisfied with themselves. Principals and other administrators will become more harassed because parents will often declare that the school is deteriorating. The translation of that declaration is that the pattern is different from the one which existed when they were in school; therefore, the "standards" must be lower! Finally, the school board may lose courage and begin to withdraw support. At that point, instructional leadership undergoes the acid test; and, if the accumulation of experience is any indicator, that is when it often begins to wobble.

Nevertheless, in his role as change agent, the instructional leader knows that anything but a superficial change in instruction, curriculum, or organization will create a chain reaction. Its effects will be felt throughout the school. One sure sign that a change is taking hold is that it begins to cause other dislocations. If these factors are not taken into account, predicted, provided for, and explained, then there will be the inevitable retreat to the familiar stance of reacting rather than responding to the message.

Students tell us that the quality of school life is repressive because they perceive it to be largely regulatory and inimical to penetration from the outside. What do they want? They seem to be calling for an open, sensitive school environment to which they can contribute, by their enthusiastic participation, a kind of resilience and immediacy. They want the school to become important to them because they need the help it is capable of giving them. They want to participate in making the school an important source of learning, although they see it as but one of many such sources. They want to be a party to the restructuring of the school environment, not to the rearranging of it.

Should the kind of ideas suggested in this issue of *Educational Leadership* be seriously incorporated into the process of rethinking the functions of formal schooling, the result would fundamentally alter every facet of the school environment. It is not unreasonable to predict that as the students perceive the school to be responsive, they will perceive it to be enabling. That is all they want; and so do we.

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