

Student Freedom and Power as Instruments

MICHAEL S. KAYE *

I LIVE and work at Pacific High School, an educational community in which students have all the freedom and power they choose to exercise. No domain is protected from student control. Students decide whether or not they will attend classes or school. They even have the final say as to who teaches at Pacific and what is taught.

It would be nice to report that student freedom and power have created an educational utopia. Yet this would be implausible and, sadly, false as well. Instead, I will try to explain why student power and freedom are worthwhile, despite the problems they raise.

Since the orbiting of Sputnik there has been a tremendous emphasis on cognitive education. It is feared that students, left to their own devices, will neglect this aspect of their education. To a certain extent this fear seems justified. Many of the students who come to Pacific completely reject cognitive matters. Cognitive education is linked in their minds with boredom and coercion. They feel that it is nothing more than an excuse to oppress them. Coming from institutions whose stated aims are cognitive education, they tend to throw out the baby with the bath water. Some of these students are occupied with noncognitive activities, crafts, music, working around the school. Others do virtually nothing.

It is not the case, however, that these students would receive an academic educa-

tion if they were required to attend classes. Ten years ago, when I went to high school, many of us learned much of what was offered. We also learned to hate a great deal of it, and that the only reason to learn it was that we were in trouble if we did not. But we did learn it. This is becoming less and less true with the present generation of high school students.

Today's students are not willing to take extrinsic rewards and coercion as the reason for learning. They are principled. Today's students are willing to take "F's" and harassment rather than knuckle under. In most high schools, however, students are not forced to make this kind of clear-cut choice. They can turn off mentally, appear physically, get "C's" and never be noticed. More and more students are doing this, with or without chemical help. That is, an increasing number of students in public high school use drugs to get through the day. Teachers interested in cognitive education are constantly fooled and seldom educated.

When Students Control

Given this situation, it is clearly advantageous for students to have control of their own education. When they have freedom and power, our students will stop fooling us

* Michael S. Kaye, Associate Director, Pacific High School, Palo Alto, California

and start educating us. Students who are free to go to classes or not can be encouraged by a competent staff to consider seriously whether math, history, science, etc. are indeed worthwhile. If this is a live question, students will seriously consider it. It is not a live question, obviously, if it is a foregone conclusion that students will be forced to go to class.

A student came to Pacific High School last spring having done poorly in the preceding semester of public high school. Most of his time had been spent with his girl friend in the face of mounting pressure from the girl's parents. The girl also came to Pacific. Pacific was, for them, nothing more than a way to be together and to be left alone. Given the freedom to be together, they soon broke up. Both of them began pursuing the cognitive education that they had just rejected. The boy found that he did not have the discipline to work as hard as he wanted to at Pacific and returned to public high school. The girl has remained at Pacific and works hard at a variety of academic subjects.

Many of the students best equipped to benefit from cognitive education will not allow themselves to be educated in a coercive system. Many students need time and freedom to work out social and emotional problems before they can devote the time required for cognitive education. If we are truly interested in cognitive education we will not let coercive systems get in its way. By pushing unwilling and unready students into academic courses, we may be closing the academic door on many of them forever.

There are students who will not choose academics under any circumstances. Left to their own devices, though, many of these will find valuable things to do. Students who would be wasting five hours a day in class find meaningful involvement in a host of activities. One student, who had been a failure his entire academic career, got a sense of his own personal worth when he had the freedom to become involved in a building program. Compulsory attendance in shop classes is not freedom to get involved in a building program, nor is it as educational. Students who cannot be handled in the aca-

demical track have already been "turned off." The least that can be done is to leave them alone.

Our job as secondary educators is to attempt to educate the whole student in the most efficient and relevant way possible. It is scandalous when students' time is wasted by forcing them to attend classes from which they will learn nothing. Adolescents have a lot to do in a short time. They will waste a lot of time on their own. It does not behoove us to waste any for them.

In Bits and Pieces

Another problem raised by student power and freedom is student competence. Adolescents generally are not as competent as adults. Student power does not always make for smoothly run schools. Students here are constantly making decisions that I know I can make better. But my job is to help in the education of those students, not just to run an efficient organization.

Last winter Pacific students took over the entire job of running the school. Had the staff opposed this, we would still be fighting last winter's battle. The student administration at Pacific was, however, short-lived. Nevertheless, its termination did not leave us with a bunch of dissatisfied students and gloating staff members. Because the students found that they were neither competent nor interested in running the school for a long period of time, administration by students soon ended. Yet this experience left in its wake a school that was better for its having been tried.

In the process, students were educated in ways that would have been impossible under any other circumstances. Students who were unmotivated for the entire year found something worth their interest. For the first time in their lives they were involved in something that really mattered. One parent told me that his son had been listless and uncommunicative before the student take-over. After that he sought out his father to discuss budgets.

Student government does not actually fail when it makes mistakes. It fails when

it is not a vehicle through which the students involved get educated. We give students effective power to influence their education, not because they necessarily *know* how to use it, but so they can *learn* how.

I would like to suggest why student power and freedom have not been adopted on a more widespread scale. One reason is that the primary aim of many secondary schools is custodial and not educational. This is easily seen when we realize that a polite, well groomed student can learn virtually nothing in four years of high school and yet pass through unnoticed. A student who devotes his entire school day to learning classics may be harassed and disciplined if he attends school and arrested if he does not.

Another more subtle reason is that educators tend to dole out freedom and power in bits and pieces. These bits and pieces are usually so small that they cease to be freedom and power. When student courts are allowed

to enforce trivial rules that they have not agreed to in the first place, it should be no surprise when the students are not "responsible." Students who make a joke out of student court are responding to the situation quite accurately.

We educators prejudice the case against student power and freedom on two counts. Suspecting the students to be unready, we test them by giving them trivial responsibilities. We then expect them not to notice that the responsibilities are trivial. When the students do notice and act accordingly, we conclude what we had suspected all along, that the students are not ready for freedom and power. Our most highly motivated and intelligent students are not interested in proving to us their worthiness by some token involvement in the school dance. Many of them will work harder than might be expected if they have the freedom to take charge of their education and their lives. □

The ASCD Research Council, in cooperation with
The Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development—PSEA

sponsors conference on

VALUES AND MULTI-ETHNIC EDUCATION

theme of the

15th Annual Eastern Research Institute

The Eastern Institute will examine programs and proposals which have been designed to meet the needs of specific sub-groups and individuals in view of the challenges of social change and conflict. Value questions such as the following will be discussed by participants in morning workshop sessions and afternoon formal presentations:

- Does our present value system permit us to discriminate as a prerequisite to meaningful and functional integration?
- What do distinctive ethnic group values say to researchers and curriculum developers as they address themselves to education in a multi-ethnic culture?

April 29-May 1, 1970 • Benjamin Franklin Hotel • Philadelphia

Preregistration required. Write to:

**Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA
1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036**

Copyright © 1970 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.