

# Teaching in a **NEW** School

HELEN M. JOHNSON\*

**W**ITH the growth of cities and towns at the turn of the century in the United States, the graded plan of education was introduced with the idea that the pace and pattern of learning for all children would be the same. This plan flourished well enough to be rather firmly rooted in most of the present 122,242 schools in this nation,<sup>1</sup> despite the knowledge of human growth and development and of the learning process revealed by psychological research during the first half of the 20th century.

The outdated concept of administrative control which treats all children alike is difficult to eradicate in established schools. Studies reveal that although there has been some resistance by professionals to the effecting of change, much of their reluctance has been shared by the public and students. Parting with tradition and custom is difficult even when the meaning of these traditions and customs has long since become obscured and irrelevant.

It may be possible to effect desirable change in established schools, but too often traditional administrative concepts of control have been perpetuated with more emphasis on similarities than on differences, not only in respect to learners but to teachers and

principals as well. Because established schools are not readily able to depart from their control-oriented mores, little headway has been made in reaching the goal of optimum development for all children, or as more familiar to most of us of "meeting individual needs."

The record reveals that despite good intentions, many children enter and leave school without their needs having been met or even recognized. Teachers, too, find it possible to enter and leave professional service without so much as changing their grade or subject, their lesson plans or methods. In contrast, experience with new schools indicates that it is possible to create and maintain a continually changing, always improvable environment in which learning can be individualized.

A new school might not be a new school save for the date on its cornerstone. Likewise to teach in a new school might not be different from teaching in an established school except that the school plant is new, clean, has an "operable" wall here and there, or, indeed, has no walls. Yet according to informal surveys and experiences shared with the faculties of some 16 new schools opened within the past five years, it seems reasonable to conclude that teaching in a new school can be, as one teacher put it, "the most

<sup>1</sup> *Saturday Review*, October 1969. Estimated number of elementary and secondary schools, universities, colleges, and junior colleges from U.S. Office of Education and National Education Association sources.

\* *Helen M. Johnson, Area Director, Montgomery County Public Schools, Rockville, Maryland*

rewarding experience I've had in eight years of teaching!"

Why teaching in some new schools is more rewarding than in others can be determined on the basis of clearly definable factors which will be called givens and described briefly below:

1. Careful selection of principal
2. Involvement of principal in selection of teachers
3. Staff development experiences for the staff prior to the opening of the school with continued in-service experiences after opening
4. Reasonable working conditions
5. Administrative realities.

### **Selection of Principal**

The selection of the principal may well be the most important factor in ensuring effectiveness of the learning program in the school. To create a new environment for learning, the principal sets the tone as a learner himself, one consciously pursuing learning with enthusiasm. The significance of the principal's role is heightened through responsibility for selecting teachers with similar characteristics. The most effective principal in any school is the one who creates an environment in which teachers are encouraged to teach creatively. Teachers in new schools tend to corroborate these criteria, although in more personal terms, with their comments regarding the importance of the principal:

"Appreciates me as a person"

"Doesn't tell us how but works with us to solve our problems"

"Is fair but firm in his dealings with students, teachers, and parents"

"Never throws 'the book' at us but lets us know what the limits are"

"Is enthusiastic when things go well and helps when they need to go better"

"Rarely gives lectures and speeches at faculty meetings"

"Has high standards of performance"

"He may not always have the answer but he knows how to go about finding it"

"Really cares about the kids"

"A real educational leader, I'm proud to work with him."

### **Selection of Teachers**

In selecting staff for the new school, the principal looks for teachers who help students to grow and to learn to continue growth on their own, and who facilitate self-direction and self-selection for each learner. He seeks out teachers who can be comfortable as directors of curriculum, consultants to their learners, and managers of the environment for learning. The teacher in this setting is not only encouraged to be creative but expected to be so. Just as children achieve more because their teachers are convinced they can, teachers who know their professional competencies are truly respected by their principal achieve more than teachers who are themselves directed and supervised by less confident principals.

In response to inquiry regarding selection of teachers, principals of new schools report that they seek teachers with outstanding competence in the classroom, broad knowledge and understanding of the learner and the learning process, ability to work well with colleagues, students, parents, and administrators, desire to continue to grow personally and professionally, concern for children and existing inadequacies in their education, and openness to new ideas.

Some principals of new schools have moved to the point of including teachers on interviewing teams in order to develop a total school staff whose members can be mutually supportive and reinforcing to each other as they plan and organize the learning program cooperatively.

### **Staff Development Experiences**

Perhaps most significant for teachers of teachers is the statement by one beginning teacher in a new school, "Nothing in my training prepared me for this." Experience in the new school itself provides the setting

for staff development and the ability to put into practice the theories as yet given little more than lip-service in most preservice or in-service education programs. The inability of many college supervisors to interpret and to cope with changing practices in innovative schools still causes the more traditional schools to be selected by most teacher education institutions for student-teaching experience.

The scarcity of beginning teachers who come prepared to deal with individual learning and continuous progress, flexible scheduling, cooperative or team teaching, and varied patterns of organization is startlingly evident. How remarkable that learning by doing, although subscribed to as an axiom, has been so seldom allowed to occur in the preparation of teachers! It may well be that by carefully selecting teachers for the new school, and by challenging them to use their talents in the best interests of children within the framework of existing policies and broad curriculum, another key to improving the teaching-learning process will have been found.

Ideally, part of the new school's staff, if not all, will have opportunity in a workshop setting to spend the summer prior to opening in studying students' records, analyzing the community, and organizing the learning program. This opportunity to prepare specifically for the job ahead is unanimously declared by teachers to be a most significant aspect of program planning. By participating cooperatively in decision making regarding goals and objectives, program development, and pattern of organization, staff members' commitment to and enthusiasm for their program become intensified, thus producing high morale, mutual support, and loyalty to one another.

"I felt more secure in knowing that none of us had all the answers"

"I wasn't afraid to admit I made a mistake"

"My team agreed to help me for the first few days" (Beginning teacher)

"My team would not agree to the field trip I've arranged for my 6th graders for the last five years (Experienced teacher), and I couldn't understand why until weeks later"

"We really got to know each other."

Principals believe that without this opportunity little significant change can occur; that the feeling of involvement, once established, leads to seeking out continuing growth experiences, finding new ways to deploy time, talents, and resources.

"Time to develop common understandings and cooperative efforts is absolutely necessary before school begins."

"Teachers tell me what kind of resource help they want and when we can best schedule meetings, conferences, workshops."

### Reasonable Working Conditions

Beyond the limits of most local school decision making are such items as pupil-teacher ratio, salary, leave, amount of funds available for materials of instruction, textbooks, equipment, library books, teacher-specialists, calendar, and length of school day. These limits may be considered as conditions of employment and in many school systems are negotiated well before the school year begins. Within these limits, the whole staff becomes involved in decision making regarding grouping, how to select and deploy materials of instruction, equipment, textbooks, how to use the building and its facilities, means of reporting to parents—indeed all those matters that traditionally have been decided by the principal with consultative help at best from department chairmen. This opportunity to determine cooperatively who will do what, when, where, and by what means seems to be one of the most gratifying aspects of teaching in a new school.

"It was wonderful not to have to use texts that were there before me and which were not old enough to discard."

"It took us weeks to thrash out a reporting system we could all buy, but it was worth it. We no longer have parent complaints about Miss Jones using a heavier pencil than Mrs. Smith."

"Having a say about which students I will teach and when and where makes me feel better about all of them."

"If we have problems now about materials,

we can't blame it on anyone else so we try to avoid mistakes because we'll only have to start over again."

And from a principal,

"I never could have had this kind of program in my old school—half of the teachers were there before me and made it clear they expected to be there long after I left."

"What's most exciting to me is the way we're able to continually improve on what we thought was already pretty great!"

"What I like most is the way everyone sees me—as a facilitator, not as someone to be afraid of."

### Administrative Realities

"To teach in a new school is to grow professionally and personally," is one teacher's perception. Yet she goes on to say that, in talking with teachers in other new schools, she knows it might not have been so were it not for:

1. Strong leadership on the part of the principal
2. Encouragement and support from the administrative hierarchy
3. Willingness of the hierarchy to set no limits other than those established by the framework of policies and procedures, and the system-wide program of studies
4. Availability of administrative and supervisory staff for support and help as requested, with little or no intervention, or insistence on a particular method or program
5. Willingness of the school staff to see themselves as partners with parents, mutually concerned about facilitating learning for their children
6. Avoidance of labels generally associated with educational innovation (itself a flag word!)

because the multiple images these labels connote make them virtually impossible to be generally understood or accepted

7. Recognition that the initial shakedown period of establishing the new school may be accompanied by waves as staff dynamics and community reaction roll in uncharted waters. If this occurs, faith and trust by the administration in the ability of the new school staff to continue full steam ahead to meet their sound objectives are absolutely necessary, with enough support and counsel to see them through the difficulties.

The school population explosion will have served education well, if enough *new* schools are built, thus challenging educators, school boards, architects, and the public in general to rethink and restate the purposes, objectives, values, and attitudes of public education. The freedom and capacity to bring teachers, students, new knowledge, and technology together are built in from the start along with the new school itself. Standards for self-discipline, excellence in education, and learning to cope with a constantly changing world can be developed cooperatively. Old, accepted notions can be discarded easily in the new school setting. Old, accepted notions proved to be educationally valid and feasible should, of course, be retained.

Giving priority to consideration of individual differences of students together with available resources and facilities explodes the myths of uniform classes, texts, teachers, class periods, curriculum units, grades, and schools. An exhilarating spirit of inquiry, problem solving, enthusiasm, commitment, and continuing change permeates the learning environment of a new school if teachers and students are convinced that their individual learning and growing are just as important as their acquisition of basic skills and knowledge. □



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