

School Is Now and We're Late!

DALE ALAM

**Children chained to desks
remedial
compensatory . . . and
they want out—so young
and here we are the great providers—
keepers of the chains
diagnosers. . . .
compensators, planners . . . and
we don't seem to want out
imaginary chains hold us
the great providers—keepers of the chains
their chains, our chains. . . .
freedom demands courage and conviction
and what is life without freedom?**

I WANT to share some observations, apply a little theory, and discuss a proposed school program.

The observations relate to a project just recently completed in which four Michigan State University professors became involved in an inner city teaching experience in an elementary school in Lansing, Michigan. Early in the experience it became obvious to me that many of the eight- and nine-year-olds that I worked with were functioning on deficiency drives. Their basic human psychological needs were simply not being met. The program attempted to help the classroom teacher by "beefing-up" the support system within the classroom, and all good things were to happen because there were more of us around.

Many argue that the school function is related to cognitive development, and most of

my educational psychologist colleagues (of all people) indicate that this bit about psychological needs, if in fact true, clearly rests outside the confines of the school; the "school can't be all things" argument I believe they called it. It is impossible for me to believe that we can measure cognitive entering behavior and begin assigning cognitive tasks and expect psychologically unhealthy children to grow cognitively.

I am amazed and concerned that we in the schools are so unaware that acceptance and self-worth come first and reading and math skills develop later. I am amazed and concerned that readiness is generally a cognitive concept, occasionally a physical concept, and seldom a psychological concept. Maturation is generally a physical concept, occasionally a cognitive concept, and seldom if ever a psychological concept.

I will spare the reader my observations regarding the discipline and control models applied by us at the project school. They were very typical and familiar and tiring and distressing and frustrating and forever. I do not blame the teachers, because their choices are so few. I blame us all in the name of education that we can be so blind, unimaginative, scared, confused, and cautious.

Many of these children simply would not respond to threat, which left us as teachers helpless. Most of the children lived in the *now*. So much so that it was not uncommon for one to ask, "Is it before or after lunch?"



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Tomorrow wasn't 12 hours away, it was never. What is school in the *now*? How do you behave when it suddenly dawns on you that you cannot control another human being? Again, I cannot blame the teacher. I blame us all.

A Little Theory

Principles of organic learning suggest that options should be open to human beings.

Behavioristic learning theory suggests few options because it is easier to control the person. How can we teach a pigeon to play a piano if we let him fool around with a drum? Limit the options and limit the stimuli.

Advocates of organic learning promote options for many reasons. Basically, they hold that humans are motivated internally; and at least affectively and in many cases cognitively, they know what is best for them. In a psychological sense they respond to their own human needs. Options also help the hu-

man being accept a greater degree of responsibility for his own growth. We all need options because we all have unfulfilled needs, and through these options we have a chance at least of meeting them.

A Model Elementary School

This is not a school for the future. There is no future. This is for *now*. I personally regret that it was not today, for today we needed it!

First, I will scare away the frightened educator and negotiating team chairman by saying that the pupil-teacher ratio will be determined by the size of the room. To be financially practical this plan will require at least 40 or 50 to 1. The model simply suggests that we will develop a support system outside the classroom rather than inside. Progressive systems may find aides or interns, or student teachers, or volunteers to help the teacher, but I do not believe that to be essential.

The outside support system will consist of open labs in many areas. I can list some, but creative and sensitive teachers can do better. I would have an open lab in industrial arts, homemaking, or maybe we should call it kitchen, physical education, inquiry center (science), discovery center (math), music, art, library (of course), reading center (not assigned remedial stuff), a certified teacher with a station wagon who would be a master at planning trips, a media center for photography and reproducing things, etc.

Please, teachers, don't sign up for a time in which all 40 of your children must be in the gym or the kitchen. These are options for kids and support for teachers. The industrial arts lab is a natural and I can't believe that elementary schools have so few.

The kitchen is where the popcorn comes from and where we make cupcakes for Charlie's birthday. The physical education program would probably have to be scheduled, but not as we know it. Let's ask the physical education guy to let us know a day or so ahead just what will be going on in the gym or outside. "P.E. Schedule for Now." 9 to 10 dodge ball (come anytime); 10 to 11 mats will be down; 11 to 12 we're jumping rope and playing rhythm games; 1 to 2 BALLS—big balls, little balls, bounce and throw, baskets and punch, catch and roll; 2 to 3 organized games for all—see you in the gym!

The inquiry center would be beautiful. All the gorgeous stuff of science: experiments, projects—think, manipulate, do,

learn, talk, react, act, test, grow, question.

The discovery center would be fun. Math games and things to do. Little sequence, mostly cards and puzzles, problems that are *now*—real.

The music lab would be next. There would be instruments to play, records to hear, songs to sing, fun to be had *now*.

The art lab is open also. There it is, folks—clay and paint, paper and crayon, pencil and brush, tools and ideas, express and create. It's yours, little boy, and it's *now*.

The library is just what we all know a real library to be. We don't have to call it a learning center any more because learning is wherever you are. So welcome back to the library!

The reading center—

The certified driver and teacher—

A photography center—

Then there must be other labs, different ideas to be tested, and more effort to help create meaning.

So here's what we have: a classroom and a classroom teacher as we know these today, and a support system for teachers, options for children. By using the support the teachers can help a child diagnose, and through the options the child can find himself.

We have to move quickly into the *now*, because that's where the learning is!

—DALE ALAM, *Associate Professor of Education, Michigan State University, East Lansing.*

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