

# Sensitivity: A

OUR rapid transition from an agricultural to a technological society, from a marginal existence to affluence, has intensified old human problems and created new ones. Since we were unprepared to cope with the mass migration to urban centers, changing employment patterns, disruption of family and community mores, the demands of minority groups, along with a host of other problems, such rapid change has produced massive cultural shock.

Our young people, well aware of the inconsistencies in our society, in search of meaning in their lives and lacking clearly defined roles, tend to add to our confusion by challenging our beliefs, our assumptions, and our institutions.

However, as we search for direction and focus, we could do worse than listen to the responses of two high school juniors who, when asked, "What do you think you need to learn to do?" replied:

1. To communicate with all sorts of people
2. To learn how to learn
3. To cope with ourselves
4. To make a (wise) decision
5. To help other people
6. To adapt to change
7. To solve problems
8. To learn how to put all of these things together in order to take constructive action.

To say that schools need to change in

these directions is one thing; to help school personnel to develop the necessary attitudes, behavior, knowledge, and skills necessary to do so is quite another. Change does not come easily to adults or to institutions.

The problem then is to find the training methodology and to develop the vehicles which will enable personnel to acquire the new attitudes, knowledge, behavior, and skill necessary for schools to become dynamic, self-generating institutions. Such schools will be capable of responding to and planning for changing needs and conditions in a systematic way.

Our first attempts to create change in schools through the use of group dynamics occurred nearly 20 years ago. During the intervening years we used the methodology in a variety of ways, at first with poor results. We were able to send a few people to the National Training Laboratories at Bethel, Maine, for a two-week session; but these people often expressed frustration at their inability to find others in their school who were willing to take a look at the process of group work.

However, these early attempts and the development of an inquiry-based summer laboratory school in 1953 for youngsters in grades 4-12 led to the development of the design of the model used for training during the three-year period from 1967 to 1970.

Our first really successful use of group dynamics occurred about 1955 when this process was combined with individual coun-

# Superintendent's View

JAMES A. KIMPLE \*

seling, group counseling, self-analysis of academic achievement, and intensive training in effective writing, thinking, and methods of study. High school juniors and seniors (my oldest son among them) were completely turned on and, although they officially met from 7 to 11 p.m., unofficially they convened at 6 and continued until 2 a.m. in the local diner. This was voluntary participation with no extrinsic rewards and the results were phenomenal. Conducted over a three-year period, most of the young men and women were transformed from mediocre to high achievers.

## A Continuing Effort

Our second successful application of group dynamics and organizational development work started in 1963 in the South Brunswick Public Schools when all administrators attended a training session of the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine. This effort has continued through 1970. From 1967 to 1970, training has been provided through an ESEA Title III grant Number 68-3566-1.

In our proposal we noted that during recent years the South Brunswick Public Schools had been making significant strides toward developing a meaningful educational program for every child in the district. However, we had found that supplementary programs and cultural enrichment activities would be of relatively little value until all

administrators and teachers were able to examine, and where necessary modify, their attitudes and behavior, especially toward children and their parents.

In our guiding principles, we indicated that: (a) one of the most important needs facing public schools is to bring classroom practice more nearly into line with current knowledge in the areas of child growth and development, human relations, and learning theory; (b) curriculum is more than cognitive learning and it embraces everything which occurs in a school; (c) teacher personality and behavior have a profound effect upon the lives of children; (d) if schools are to become more positive forces in the lives of children, schools must change; (e) the only way to change schools is to change the perceptions and behavior of administrators and teachers.

Detailed objectives we described as: (a) to develop and demonstrate an in-service training program for administrators and teachers which will result in significant changes in teacher perceptions and classroom practices; (b) to accomplish this purpose we shall attempt to: (1) develop trust among staff members; (2) increase sensitivity to the effects of one's own behavior upon others; (3) increase sensitivity to the needs of children; (4) free teachers of rigid

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restrictions imposed by fixed courses of study, inflexible time schedules, inflexible grouping practices, etc.; (5) help teachers develop skill in goal setting, planning, systematic recording of information, and evaluation of learning activities; and finally (6) help teachers become more productive as team members.

The basic design of the training model included a six-week summer session and the equivalent of two weeks for follow-up during the school year. The summer session included:

2 weeks	4 weeks
Group Dynamics	a.m. Teaching in a summer laboratory school
	p.m. Continuous evaluation and planning of morning program by teaching teams; training groups continue work in group dynamics

This training program involved all but two or three members of the staff of a new middle school, elementary and secondary school teachers. In addition, we developed a unique and highly successful undergraduate teacher intern program. Seniors from Newark State College participated in the summer training and then spent a semester with a teacher or teachers of their own choice.

## Reactions of Participants

Although the evaluation is not fully completed, the reactions of the participants and our own observations indicate that the program has been even more successful than we had originally thought it might be. No person has been harmed in the process and no participant thought it a waste of time.

Experienced teachers expressed themselves as follows:

"The most significant experience to me this summer was having a group of educators embark upon trying to understand each other. Too often schools are merely a place to work with no significant interest in the other people who work alongside of you."

"For the first time in many years of teaching I was able to become involved with people.

These were not teachers to me, they were people whom I grew to know. I also regained a feeling of importance that I had not felt in recent years."

"I see the administration not as a threat, but rather as a resource to me. I can work without a sense of 'big brother' watching over me and I feel the freedom to try new things."

"The feeling of freedom that I experienced in dealing with students has enabled me to feel a total commitment to this school. Knowing that the administration is truly sincere in its desire for innovation has made me able to make innovations."

Interns and cooperating teachers said:

"In the beginning, the group was composed of uncertain individuals, each regarding the others as either a threat or just indifferent. As we proceeded to discuss personal feelings we became aware of each other's fears and expectations. The turning point (I feel) came after we split into subgroups and probed personal experiences and feelings. After reassembling into a large group, we (as a group) were able to share and better understand each group member's feelings. From there we have continued to grow and strengthen our relationships to each other and with the group as a whole. Each day we have continued making progress and evaluating our failures and successes (as a T-group) in a more realistic manner."

I am now even more enthusiastic about the potential of group dynamics, sensitivity training, and especially organizational development work than I was when first introduced to this process 20 years ago. Not once in these years have I observed any harmful effects upon any participant, student, teacher, administrator, or parent; quite the contrary, I have watched people blossom and become far more capable individuals, and have seen faculties become self-directing.

I have been especially impressed with the intern program—with some minor modifications this model could be profitably used by every teacher education institution.

## Precautions and Suggestions

We do not pretend that we know how to take full advantage of the potential of organizational development work. We have,

however, learned a few things that may be helpful to another school district or institution contemplating use of organizational development work for the first time.

- We believe that organizational development work should begin with or include the administrator. Unless he is involved in and committed to the complete process, he may be threatened by the expertise developed by staff members and may find ways to prevent effective work.

- All participants should be volunteers. Some staff members resist any activity which they feel may expose their inadequacies. If forced to participate, they may cause irreparable harm.

- Do not expect miracles. This is hard, exhausting work which may have no effect upon some. It takes time, so allocate six weeks during the summer for your initial effort.

- Provide time for follow-up during the course of the school year. There seems to be a very substantial wash-out effect within six months, especially in group dynamics training.

- Be careful whom you select as trainers or consultants. If a trainer offers you a package promising extraordinary achievement, I suggest that you proceed cautiously. It's your organization, not his. He can walk away from the consequences. You can't. If the trainer is not interested in your organizational concerns and is unwilling to plan cooperatively, find someone else.

- We prefer to conduct organizational development work on site. Individual growth opportunities for those who desire them are available at well-known training centers. Send some personnel who wish to attend.

- Be careful that training exercises are used judiciously by teachers in their own classrooms. Some are most appropriate—others take more expertise than teachers can develop in a short time.

- Anticipate some conflict. No matter

how carefully you plan you will receive some criticism. The results are worth the risk.

- Avoid giving the impression that there is something mysterious about training. There isn't, but the impression is easy to create.

- Provide extended training for key personnel. Training for new staff members and follow-up sessions for "old ones" will continue to be needed.

- Sensitivity training, group dynamics, or organizational development will not cure a sick institution. If a staff feels that it is doing the best possible job and if it blames others for its own shortcomings, this training probably won't help.

- Conversely, organizational development work will aid an institution which is healthy and wants to improve its performance.

- Sensitivity training can help staff members develop mutual trust and confidence, become aware of the effects of their own behavior upon the group. However, this personal growth does not teach the individual to solve problems. Other processes must be used in conjunction with it. It will not, for example, teach teachers how to teach reading.

- Involve as many members of a total staff as possible. "Outsiders" tend to create dissension.

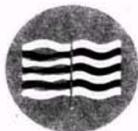
- Be prepared for different rates of change among staff members. Some acquire new skills rapidly, others may need three years, and still others may never change.

- Permit staff members—a group of teachers or a teacher—to try different teaching techniques and to proceed at their own rate. Nothing makes a school as stagnant as expecting all to move at the same time.

- Keep the board of education and the community informed of your progress. If possible, involve them in training.

- Allow ample time for staffing and planning—at least six months.

- Limit your objectives realistically. □



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