



Sensitivity Training: Salvation or Conspiracy?

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THE past decade has produced a renaissance of interest in humanism in education. A growing interest in affective learning has gradually gained ground on the cognitive domain in schools. Many educators have been scurrying about searching for a safe way to get on the bandwagon while others have chosen to ignore the entire issue.

Throughout the nation, particularly in larger urban areas, educators have been attempting to apply various human relations training concepts and strategies to educational programs. The results are mixed and opinions vary. The present status of human relations programs is precarious, yet such programs frequently are characterized as a salvation or a conspiracy.

The Movement

Sensitivity training is a nebulous term which is seldom used by professionals. This term loosely includes a variety of human relations training approaches, organizational development techniques, and group dynamics practices. The term has attracted a good deal of attention because of its illusory entertaining, exciting, and emotional reputation. At best, sensitivity training is a term with a questionable reputation and imprecise meaning, and it should be more appropriately called human relations training.

Generally, social psychologists and psychologists believe that human relations training could provide a significant contribution

to the growing needs of school programs which prepare students for life in an increasingly complex and dehumanized world. However, efforts to establish programs have met with myriad troubles: unclear or nonexistent objectives, ill-trained or noncertificated training personnel, the absence of evaluative procedures, and the lack of substantive research evidence which clearly establishes human relations training as beneficial to organizational effectiveness. Nevertheless, all levels of educational enterprises are investing time and money in programs and training strategies.

Human relations training programs are frequently directly or indirectly related to the National Training Laboratories (NTL) of the National Education Association (NEA). The NTL is the parent organization of most training enterprises. The NTL is concerned about expanding human potential across a wide spectrum of formal organizations, and, generally, this group has earned the respect of social and behavioral scientists as a professional organization. NTL provides training opportunities, certification programs, and program development for many schools throughout the nation. The Center for the Advanced Study of Educational Administration (CASEA), the Institute for the Development of Educational Activities (IDEA), the

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Western Behavioral Sciences Institute (WBSI), and innumerable other private and federally funded enterprises are engaged in rigorous longitudinal studies and applications of human relations practices, strategies for change, and affective learning techniques.

Research

Research involving various human relations enterprises in education is relatively sparse, methodologically questionable, and inconclusive. Imprecise objectives and ineffective evaluation have created a paucity of research data which indicate any justifiable stance on the question of the viability of training experiences in schools.

The research of Joyce and others¹ involved the use of a series of communications tasks which are designed to increase the sensitivity of teachers to the frame of reference of the learner. Sensitivity training intervention in teacher training programs produced little direct effect on the sensitivities measured. Although the program failed to achieve its principal objective, it did achieve an ancillary objective of increasing the ability of teachers to build rapport with each other and with students.

¹B. Joyce *et al.* "Sensitivity Training for Teachers: An Experiment." *The Journal of Teacher Education* 20 (1): 75-83; Spring 1969.

A symposium presented at the 1970 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association dealt with the topic of "Curriculum Change Through Organizational Change: A Human Relations Training Program in a School System."² The presentations offered little explicit data to suggest the success or failure of programs in New Jersey public schools.

A comparative study of human relations training methods and the discussion-lecture approach in preparing undergraduate resident assistants was conducted at Ohio University during the 1967-68 academic year.³ Groups exposed to human relations training methods were rated superior by students as compared to groups which were trained principally by the discussion-lecture method.

An experimental study was made in Tennessee to explore the effects of human relations training with classroom teachers and administrators at the elementary and secondary levels in public schools.⁴ An ex-

² See: *Abstracts/Two: 1970 Annual Meeting Symposia*, American Educational Research Association, 1970, p. 17.

³ See: *Abstracts/One: 1970 Annual Meeting Symposia*, American Educational Research Association, 1970, p. 113.

⁴ J. L. Khana. *An Evaluation of the Human Relations Program*. Project Upper Cumberland, Final Report, Title III ESEA, Contract #67-03525, Livingston, Tennessee, 1969.



Photos courtesy of the author

Much uncertainty exists as to the value of training experiences in school.

perimental group was involved in a two-week human relations laboratory in the summer of 1968 and, subsequently, 14 weekly sessions during the following school year. Changes in the experimental and control groups were assessed by internal and external criteria. The data indicated that both teachers and administrators exposed to human relations training became less authoritarian, developed greater self-insight, improved interpersonal relationships, and improved leadership skills.

Various other research investigations are reported in the *Research Bulletin* of the Florida Educational Research and Development Council.⁵ These studies suggest that no clear evidence has resulted from research which points to sensitivity training as a better means of achieving explicit training objectives in preservice and in-service teacher and administrator programs.

Research points an accusing finger at educators for applying training processes, the results of which are apparently unpredictable. Many educators neither look for nor perceive the same outcomes from human relations training programs. Nonspecific objectives inevitably produce nonspecific training programs and haphazard results. At the present time research suggests that what researchers call sensitivity training is a process, like a grab bag, which produces a few surprises, but only occasional and fortuitous functional products.

Some Applications

Elementary schools through graduate colleges are using various human relations training methods with some explicit objectives in mind but mainly out of curiosity. Evanston, Illinois, recently held a five-week institute for elementary teachers and administrators, and enthusiastic responses have provided incentive to expand the program to all elementary schools. Bristol Township, north of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, included

the entire school staff of 700 teachers and administrators including the superintendent, plus 100 community representatives, in one of two kinds of programs. They attended five-day workshops on leadership and minority group problems and two-day workshops for teaching personnel. Human relations training was conducted as a strategy for change.

Human relations training techniques and methods played a major role in Talent Awareness Training programs conducted in over six states involving over 20,000 elementary school teachers across the nation. The Institute of Psychoanalysis in Chicago is a pioneer group in providing human relations programs for teachers. Programs conducted at weekend retreats have been a major part of the Teacher Corps training program at the University of Oklahoma. The University of Rhode Island, UCLA, Harvard, the University of Michigan, Boston University, Case Western, SUNY at Buffalo, and MIT are reported by NTL as offering graduate programs which include sensitivity training.

Opinions surveyed and reported in the March 1970 issue of *Nation's Schools* indicated that educators are largely on the fence about sensitivity training. Relatively few schools (3 percent) provided intensive programs. Approximately 50 percent of the respondents in the survey have suspended judgment about using sensitivity training. Uncertainty about trainers and insufficient and conflicting information on the effects of



Educators discuss training as a strategy for change.

⁵ B. R. Ellis. "Sensitivity Training in Perspective." *Research Bulletin*. Gainesville, Florida: Florida Educational Research and Development Council, University of Florida, 1969.

intensive group experiences were the principal reasons given by school administrators for suspending judgment. The prevailing attitude seemed to be one of "wait and see."

Directions

There appears to be general agreement that educational programs at all levels need to improve conditions under which affective learning can be knitted into cognitive and substantive subject matter. Teachers and administrators need to improve their skills in dealing with the emotional life of their students, themselves, and their colleagues. These educators need to foster school climates which permit and encourage personal development. At this time it is difficult to answer explicit questions regarding the role of human relations training in this process. Educators are still infatuated with the notion that training alleviates tensions and reduces resistance to change.

Although much of the personal liberation associated with sensitivity training may be conducive to the more effective accomplishment of specific tasks or goals of the institution, on the other hand it may not. The truth is that educators are making a calculated guess that it will help. Human relations training programs are potentially enormously useful as component parts of overall plans to increase educational effectiveness and efficiency.

In this sense human relations training can be a means to an end, but it is unlikely to be an end in itself. Organizational development laboratories, where applied problems are confronted and dealt with, are likely to provide a better model. Here the enhancement of human sensitivities such as improved perceptual acuity is stated as an objective, developed, and evaluated within the perspective of the organization.

There is an absence of any conclusive evidence which clearly demonstrates that human relations training improves the performance of educators' tasks. Perhaps educators should become involved with the behavioral-scientific fathers of sensitivity training in collaborative activities to build



School people need to improve their skills in dealing with affective learning.

models applicable to preservice and in-service education and to curricular programs. In other words, let's go back to the drawing boards. Applications of specific human relations tasks can be tested and evaluated as means of facilitating behaviorally defined objectives.

In this way the present fear or infatuation can be replaced with a more rigorous examination and selection of explicit opportunities for experiences to achieve explicit tasks. The status of human relations training in educational programs would be greatly improved if:

1. The term sensitivity training were eliminated and replaced by the expanded concept of human relations training
2. Human relations training would be used only when clearly defined goals and behaviorally defined objectives are established
3. Research could be conducted to provide empirical evidence as guideposts to direct applications of human relations training
4. Standards for professional performance on the part of trainers could be developed and enforced to ensure quality control
5. Evaluation models to assess the results of training programs could be developed.

Maslow has called sensitivity training a new frontier in social psychology. To many it is a fad. To others it is a conspiracy, and to some a salvation. Whatever it may be or whatever it may be called, it appears as though it might be around for some time. □

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