

What Research Says About Interest in Learning

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"THE world alters as we walk on it," observed Robert Oppenheimer (1954). "The years of a man's life measure not some small growth or rearrangement or moderation of what he learned in childhood, but a great upheaval." Since Oppenheimer's remark two decades ago, radical and rapid cultural changes have transpired, and the offspring of that age have questioned not only belief in religion, belief in science, and belief in socialism, but belief in anything at all (Mead, 1970).

Today, from their encounters with teachers, curriculum, peers, as well as other forces in the cultural matrix, students are forming opinions about themselves, about learning, and about education which will canalize their behavior throughout life (Allport, 1961; Getzels, 1969). Are schools in America helping students to develop attitudes and interests on which to build commitment to the lifetime of continuing education called for in the unpredictable, swiftly changing world community envisioned for tomorrow? That is the question.

School-Related Attitudes of Yesterday and Today

Despite the fact that research has shown repeatedly that the character of attitudes is formed by about age ten (Hess and Torney, 1967; Kohlberg, 1969) and that, once established, attitudes are resistant to change (Allport, 1958), relatively little is known about how students in America view their

"What can be done to foster lifelong commitment to education instead of early alienation from teachers and others in schooling institutions? Needed are open systems of education which allow unrestricted entry to, and exit from, an array of culturally enriched, community-wide, and problem-oriented experiences over the course of individual lifetimes."

early school experiences. Witness, however, the pattern in school-related attitudes of children and adolescents depicted by studies conducted during the past quarter century.

Briefly, in a series of investigations, Jackson (1968), among others (Josephina, 1959; Leipold, 1957; Tenenbaum, 1940), found that by late elementary-school age nearly 20 percent of children are identified as *against* school and that the remaining majority, "do not feel strongly about their classroom experience, one way or the other" (p. 60). Jackson discovered, for example, that even children classified as *satisfied* with their school experience describe it with such adjectives as boring, uncertain, dull, restless, and inadequate.

Developmental studies, moreover, showed that in the course of one school year attitudes toward most school subjects become measurably more negative (Neale, Gill, and Tismer, 1970), and that, with each advancing year in school, children's evaluations

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of teachers and curriculum as well as of themselves as people become increasingly less favorable (Neale and Proshok, 1967; Yamamoto, Thomas, and Karnes, 1969). By the time they reach high-school age, investigations revealed that the academic concerns of education do not occupy a central place in the lives of most students (Coleman, 1961; Tannenbaum, 1962), but their attitudes toward themselves as students are clearly reflected in the overall evaluations they make of themselves as worthwhile human beings (Rosenberg, 1965; Snyder, 1971).

Unmistakably, the same subtle, powerful social-psychological mechanisms found to shape attitudes under other cultural circumstances (Allport, 1958; Bettelheim, 1960) are operating also in school settings. Specifically, though individuals may hold unfavorable attitudes toward those in control of their lives, they, nevertheless, may identify with the dominant group and evaluate themselves through the eyes of those with the power. Consequently, while many students evidently lack interest in formal aspects of curriculum, they devalue themselves when they fail to meet expectations for school performance set by themselves as well as by significant others such as parents and teachers.

To make the situation more distressing, such self-depreciation may lead to a lasting sense of insecurity and worthlessness (Allport, 1958). As a result, students who actually do poorly on school tasks, along with those who hold unrealistic expectations for their academic achievement, may lose confidence in their own abilities. In turn, serious mistrust of self in all likelihood increases the possibility of failure in a world characterized by unpredictability, instability, and uncontrollability. Thus, the circle of social- and self-devaluation may become vicious and never-ending.

A Hidden Curriculum

To be sure, many students manage to meet the curricular and emotional demands of school life. But, they do so by questioning *how* they will learn facts in which they have

little interest rather than by challenging *what* they will learn. What has emerged in institutionalized, mass education in consequence is a "hidden curriculum," which is most clearly evident among successful students whose judged performance in the traditional curriculum qualifies them for entrance to colleges and universities (Snyder, 1971).

To elaborate, in order to attain high grades and other academic rewards, students engage in an array of covert strategies designed to help them carefully budget their time, their emotions, and their interests among an overwhelming number of tasks which require more time for completion than is physically available. Snyder, for instance, found that the structure of institutional rewards commonly forces students to selectively neglect all but those tasks which are critical to their academic survival, and which offer them immediate gratification of achievement needs, but which do not encourage them "to be creative and imaginative, to take risks, to strike out boldly and take responsibility for [their] own education and . . . intellectual development" (p. 67).

Unfortunately, students who do not conform to the institutional demands of school and who elect instead to risk seeking out new, complex cognitive and social experiences typically fail on more conventional curricular tasks (Snyder, 1971). Sufficient time and energy to satisfy the requirements of both are simply not available for most students. Paradoxically, at a time in history when a large segment of the young are questioning the meaning of life itself (Mead, 1970; Wrenn, 1973), the traditional school experience deprives students of opportunity to develop the sense of competence which stems from solving problems offering intrinsic satisfaction but not from answering preconceived questions backed by extrinsic rewards (White, 1963).

The current rigidly compartmentalized and incremental model of curriculum emerged, however, during an age when institutionalized schooling was regarded in society as, "the principal agent of social evolution and . . . the key to individual advancement and success" (Lathrop, 1974,

pp. 181-82). But, in the past 15 years, moral and economic support of schools has waned (Wiles, 1975), proposals have been made to "de-school" education (Illich, 1971), and alternative conceptual models have been offered (Macdonald, Wolfson, and Zaret, 1974). To be questioned, then, is the persistence of schools in embracing the familiar pattern of curriculum.

Yesterday's Curriculum for Today's World?

"In all human activities we find a fundamental polarity . . .," said Cassirer (1944). "There is a ceaseless struggle between tradition and innovation, between reproductive and creative forces" (p. 244). Not surprisingly, then, since schools were originally established as a means of assuring cultural continuity through *reproduction* of certain enduring patterns among the young (Mead, 1970), forces of tradition prevail over creative and innovative ones in institutions where teachers are educated and work.

Taylor (1969a) for example, studied a representative cross section of colleges and universities where teachers are educated and concluded that the typical teacher education graduate is expected "to learn what he is taught from texts which raise few fundamental questions by teachers who are older versions of himself, and of what he will some day be" (p. 20). Likewise, more comprehensive investigations of American colleges and universities revealed that they are extraordinarily similar in mode of teaching and learning and that they prepare students to fit into the dominant institutions of society rather than to offer constructive models to challenge and change society (Schwebel, 1972).

Strikingly, college educational experiences typically encourage teachers to continue to function within the simple conception of curriculum, consisting of a prescribed pattern of courses distributed among various subjects supposedly *covering* specific topics which are prerequisite for courses to follow. On the other hand, for students, exposure to the customary model

means that while a few manage to develop their own interests and make decisions about their lives, the majority come to view education, including higher education (Taylor, 1969a), as only a place to learn an employable skill.

Demographic surveys (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973) of the pattern of participation in postsecondary education, for example, revealed that at the same time that the proportion of adults attending formal school programs is increasing, the average duration of sustained effort is less than one year, and most students take a single course. Courses offering immediate practical rewards, such as vocational training, are chosen not less than ten times more frequently than courses promising less tangible benefits such as those in personal development, public affairs, and current events. Obviously, these older students (18 to 60 years) have not expressed any lasting interest in learning within the familiar institutional context, and the character of their contact with schools is indicative of the tendency of the current structure to foster only utilitarian involvement in education.

Now, there is no intrinsic shortsightedness in learning to do something useful. However, in an unstable global community threatening nuclear holocaust along with widespread starvation, environmental pollution, and economic depression, education which "aims at the use of the self for commercial purposes and leaves the developing self and its spiritual possibilities untouched" (Taylor, 1969b, p. 12), engenders alienation, apathy, and cynicism instead of enthusiasm, commitment, and optimism. As a result, while established education relies on dependent learning confined to classrooms, focused on judging performance on competitive school tasks, and formulated in temporally removed cultures, students are left alone to struggle with the complex, real problems generated outside the school by the ever-changing social, technological, and natural environments emerging in the 20th century's prefigurative culture (Mead, 1970).

In summary, just as in any cultural setting symbols chosen to organize experi-

ence tend to foster resistance to change (Cassirer, 1944), so too the model elected to structure school experiences has been shown to be inflexible. Nonetheless, while today's hierarchical model of formal education, which partitions experience into prescribed Carnegie units to be taken during discrete time intervals, offers administrative efficiency, research shows that the typical schooling schedule provides insufficient time and opportunity for development of intrinsic interest in learning and for integration of experience in the personal life-space of most students.

What, then, can be done to foster life-long commitment to education instead of early alienation from teachers and others in schooling institutions?

What Can Be Done?

In the past, innovations in education such as programmed instruction, use of television, team teaching, systems of reading, modular scheduling, and the like, have been

mostly technical and evaluated on the basis of effectiveness within the closed system of the school (Jackson, 1968; Macdonald, 1975; Taylor, 1969a). Ready or not, the time has come to consider letting go of the traditional, closed system to build new models which encourage teachers and students to become partners, instead of adversaries, in structuring time and space for exploration and integration of experiences. Rather than the familiar self-contained schooling compressed into the first few decades of life, open systems of education which allow unrestricted entry to, and exit from, an array of culturally enriched, community-wide, and problem-oriented experiences over the course of individual lifetimes are necessary.

This type of innovation, however, demands that, in place of the current *Zeitgeist* emphasizing simple vertical transmission of information within institutions, education nurture a *Weltanschauung* in which young and old are seen as part of a global society of explorers sharing interest in a lifelong search for problems (Polanyi, 1966). From

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such a world view, teachers may help cultivate a spirit of unity within diversity of lifestyles along with continuing concern for learning by teaching students, "not what to learn, but how to learn and not what they should be committed to, but the value of commitment" (Mead, 1970, p. 72).

In closing, as a millennium in world history ends, Bob Dylan's theme, "the times,

they are a-changin'," echoes ceaseless alteration in the foundations of human existence and the unfolding of another era. Dare teachers establish alternative forms of education outside of schools in centers where all members of society, who elect to participate, may take part in the lifetime quest for learning required by the new age? That is the real question for the future.

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