



When Schools Change

W. Leslie Bobbitt

Photo: Michael D. Sullivan.

"Sometimes the school needs to change so the students may change." This author hopes that "we can drop our usual defensive stance and become more mature as an institution for the sake of the education of all youth."

Who are disaffected youth? They are the child of the ghetto who feels unwanted; the marginally desirable child who feels he or she doesn't fit in physically, economically, socially, or personally; the mental, intellectual, or emotional incompetent who feels unable to keep up; the unrecognized learning disabled who, though bright, is made to feel stupid, immature, or obstinate; and the highly motivated, mature, personally responsible student for whom the restrictions of most schools are a put down. These are the youth in schools who fail, skip, rebel, defy, disrupt, withdraw, and drop out.

These are all human beings, school-age youth, whose right is the opportunity to get an appropriate education. Their parents, in one way or another, pay the same taxes as others—taxes

that train teachers, build schools, pay salaries, and buy materials. They are also the youth who look at life through soot-colored glasses and whose frustration leads them to clog the courts, overrun the prisons, crowd public institutions, escalate social service costs, and, in many cases, terrorize their peers and teachers. Schools and society, they feel, give them a raw deal, and they get back any way they can at great cost and acute discomfort to themselves and the rest of the citizenry.

There are some schools and some teachers who answer the needs of many of these youth—the failures, truants, rebels, defiers, disrupters, and withdrawers. In those schools and with those teachers, they attend regularly, succeed in their work, and are good citizens. How can this be? What is it that makes this miraculous difference possible?

Staff Attitude

Students, like other people, are sensitive to others' feelings about them. They know which teachers react to them positively, negatively, or neutrally. At best, negative teacher attitudes



Street Academy teacher and students participate in a camp laboratory learning interdependence, cooperation, trust, and appreciation of each other as individuals with worth and human dignity.

make it more difficult for students to want to achieve; at worst students adopt the negative as their own feelings about themselves. Many educators have not adjusted to the great changes brought about by such factors as desegregation, increased holding power, and the ascendancy of the youth culture. They frequently feel that disaffected youth are unmotivated, unruly, uncouth, unprepared, and unworthy of their time and effort. They find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept and value people who are different from themselves. This is a major problem, and it must be dealt with openly and aggressively, but with sensitivity and compassion. How?

Teaching-Learning Skills

Many educators do not have the skills needed to teach below- or above-average students or those who present learning problems. Many of their negative attitudes develop from feelings of inadequacy. Teach these staff members the skills, and the negative attitudes are

reduced. Many skills needed to cope with retarded, learning disabled, and slow-learning students are known and can be taught, as well as those related to reading and other basic skills.

Behavior Management

Understandably, many teachers develop negative attitudes toward students who do not behave acceptably. Yet other teachers rarely if ever have this kind of problem. The difference lies frequently in their knowledge of the principles involved in effective management of conflict and other aspects of classroom interaction. These behavior management skills can be taught and can turn an impossible class into one that is a pleasure to work with. Consider the good teacher who was assigned to a class of behavior problems because the principal thought she could cope. She couldn't and was at the point of resigning her job. A psychologist helped her to employ appropriate behavior management techniques, and within one week, she could handle the class well.

Human Relations

Usually, people's attitudes toward others closely parallel their attitude toward themselves. A person who is unsure of himself/herself approaches others tentatively; a person who is dissatisfied with his/her own performance is likely to project at least some of this dissatisfaction onto the performance of others. People also tend to fear the unknown. Teachers who have little or no experience with people unlike themselves face a very threatening unknown when they face these people as pupils and parents. It frequently becomes a fearful situation.

Human relations skills involving self and others are known and can be taught. If they can be tied to a problem identified by the participants, the learning is likely to be more effective.

The kinds of changes involved in this area are basic and usually slow to occur. However, a school system's efforts in this direction will be rewarded by more positive attitudes and more effective teachers. It is worth the long-term process involved. When even disaffected students realize their teachers and principals care about them as individuals with worth and dignity, their perceptions of themselves begin to change. With

this change comes the beginning of feelings of self-worth, of *can do* instead of *can't do*, and of identification with the school as a helping place instead of as the enemy.

Appropriate Program

In attempting to educate a person, like it or not, we are dealing with the whole mass of complexities that are uniquely his/hers: the physical body; the neurological system; the brain; the psychological make-up; the life background; and the current environment. It is an awesome thing to contemplate. Indeed, too often its very complexity compels us not to contemplate it. We resort to simple answers for complex questions. Why doesn't Johnny learn? He's immature; he's lazy; he's retarded; he doesn't want to learn; he'll outgrow it; and all this, many times, with no serious investigation to really determine why Johnny doesn't learn.

A medical doctor who offers his/her services to the public and fails to diagnose and treat in terms of current medical knowledge is likely to be held liable for malpractice. There are few such constraints on most educators as yet. The knowledge and the means are at hand to diagnose most

learning problems and to offer effective education to meet the needs diagnosed. Federal legislation and, in many cases, state legislation, mandate an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment for all students with special needs. Failure to do so is no longer an option.

Many youth are disaffected because day after day and year after year they are subjected to classes in which it is utterly unreasonable to expect them to achieve. For example:

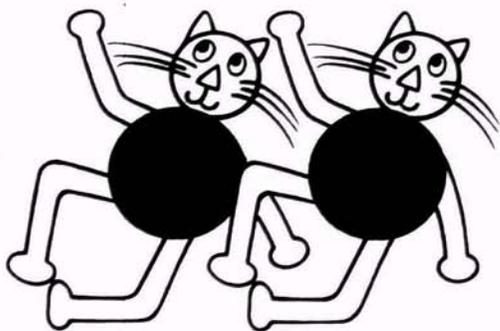
1. Johnny, a disruptive student, comes to class unprepared, without basic equipment, and does little or no work. He is treated as a discipline problem. When inquiry is made into the reasons for his behavior, he is found to be mentally retarded without the means to keep up with the class. When placed with a resource teacher part of the day with appropriate support for his teacher's altered expectations, he sees that he can do the work, and he has no need to disrupt. As a result, his I.Q. may improve, raising expectations for him.

2. Susan is behind in classwork and scores low on group tests of ability. She is assigned to a class for mentally retarded students. There she is disruptive and is then treated as a discipline prob-

Students (grades 5-12), principals, teachers, parents, and counselors plan for more student involvement in schools' decision making.



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lem. Adequate investigation into her learning problem indicates average ability. It also reveals family trauma during the first three years of school where she just did not learn basic skills. Special help with the basics enables her to do work in a regular class with no need to disrupt.

3. Paul has difficulty learning to read, his writing is illegible, and his spelling is atrocious. Otherwise he appears to be normal and intelligent. The teacher tells Paul's parents that he is immature and lazy. Together, they make a pact to pour on the pressure at school and at home. He gets worse rather than better, and is soon a problem in both places. He withdraws from peer relationships and hates school.

Adequate inquiry into the reasons for his behavior reveals undiagnosable inability to read, write, and spell; in today's vernacular, he is "learning disabled." Placement in a supportive program for retraining in reading, writing, and spelling, and the use of a tape recorder and typewriter give him new ways to cope with school work. He begins to see himself as an achiever rather than as a loser. School becomes a place to learn rather than a frustrating place.

The tragedy is that thousands of students with these and similar problems never get beyond the problem stage. In frustration, they drop out of school and become social problems. Recent investigations indicate staggering numbers of prison and juvenile detention inmates with learning disabilities.

Hassle Reduction

For many students, what they see as restrictions, nit-picking rules, and the unreasonable personal demands of some staff members, makes school an additional harassment that isn't worth the education that may seep through the turmoil.

The student whose home environment provides little structure or supervision finds the tight school ship an intolerable maze of hurdles, the nature of which he can't remember or find important.

The bright, motivated student who can handle independent study and free-time responsibly also has a problem. The restrictions imposed by such stand-bys as bells, hall passes, permissions, homework requirements, and no free time are childish and an intolerable put-down.

Sometimes the complexities of school life are so great the mentally retarded child cannot cope with them.

For many poorly motivated students with marginal skills and a family that devalues education, the denial of the pleasures of life makes school a prison. Being forbidden to chew gum, wear a hat, sport a comb, use street language, or otherwise make an impression on peers is not worth fighting in order to stay in school.

Schools, for the most part, are highly structured places. Accusations of rampant permissiveness and poor discipline, and a lack of appreciation for the goal of self-discipline cause many principals to fear change.

The current structure of senior high schools presents a contradiction to our society's expectations. High school students are given little freedom and few real choices. Suddenly, with no preparation even at the discussion level, they are expected to function effectively as adults in post high school education or on a job. For many youth, the leap from child treatment to adult treatment is too great.

How can these barriers to some students'

learning be reduced without erecting barriers to other students' learning?

Enter the Affective Curriculum

Almost always when teachers are asked what kind of student product they want to graduate, affective factors such as good self-concept, self-starting, honest, creative, and responsible lead the list. However, teacher guides and curriculum handbooks attend only to cognitive factors. To bridge this gap, we must devise means of finding out how students feel about themselves, learning, school, and staff; what's important to them; what they are like as people; what their values are; and how their cultures may differ from the conventional school expectations.

Planning must start there to help students respect their own heritage but to respect others' as well, to help them judge the appropriateness of various behaviors in various situations, to identify their strengths and interests and build on them, to alter school expectations responsibly to accommodate cultural differences, to provide alternative schools or programs, and to teach staff and students to value each person as a human being with dignity and worth.

This is a difficult assignment involving an ambitious retreading of most school personnel, since much of this curriculum must be modeled. We must start immediately and continue as long as it takes, for, as we've all known for a long time, every ounce of prevention will produce at least a pound of cure.

This is a plea for acceptance of the premise that sometimes the school needs to change so the student may change. It expresses a hope that we can drop our usual defensive stance and become more mature as an institution for the sake of the education of all youth. *FL*



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