

STUDENTS NEED THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE!



Alice G. Brand is Professor of English and Continuing Education Specialist at the University of Missouri—St. Louis.

A representative from Rutgers Student Services spoke recently to 500 alternately restless and comatose junior high school students. He was well stocked with platitudes; he urged the youngsters to be self-motivated and hard working in order to be better prepared for future professional choices. In an auditorium strategically checkered with administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers, the speaker didn't convince me. I don't think he convinced the students either. For had he asked those students what they'd do at that very moment, given the choice, I'll wager their honest response would have been to split.

I don't deny the sizable number who would choose to remain nor the high academic level they might achieve. But for too many, the junior high is a socially sanctioned holding tank between the industry of elementary school and (hopefully) the motivational recovery of high school. For every student who is not sucked into the slump, there are probably two who barely pull out of it.

You can't mistake those youngsters. Not two minutes into a lesson, they're resting their heads on their desks, slouching in their seats, or bobbing like buoys. They need to go to the lav. They've run out of paper, lost the text, or sprained their writing hand. Now watch these youngsters roller skating, building a model, watching "Three's Company," or reading *Go Ask Alice*. Their mouths hang open. Distractions, surroundings fall away. Combining wonderment and concentration, they forget themselves and surrender irresistibly to the experience.

Needless to say, not all experiences make for wholesome education. And because so many teenagers seem to drift with the tide or choose activities

of the lowest cultural common denominator—sometimes getting into serious trouble—it's difficult to convince the public that, over time, most young people can be trusted to make appropriate decisions. The schools are thus justified in making it impossible for students to exert any significant influence on the world they are part of. They browbeat their students into a curious pulp of apathy and alienation by robbing them of the opportunity to exercise socially responsible control over themselves.

Despite the premium the schools have placed on achievement, these early adolescents refuse to own the academic task because they derive from it no immediate satisfaction nor see in it any practical outcomes. Scholastic success simply has no meaning for them.

But suppose for a moment we paid serious attention to students' preferred learning styles before the onset of their adolescence. Suppose we could truly harness their exploring energies, cultivate their all-consuming interests. Maybe they would become absorbed in participatory crafts or have a four-month love affair with basketball. Perhaps it would be hair-styling, fishing, record collecting, waiting out a beagle's pregnancy, or endless tinkering with a walkie-talkie.

Miraculously, curiosity would engage. Attentiveness would fix with amazing tenacity. Self-direction would generate spontaneously. Learning would appear almost effortless. This is the stuff of education.

By nourishing any shred of natural interest or invention, no matter how impractical, temporal, or insignificant by adult standards, schools could begin to neutralize the negativism associated with formal education. We would validate students by

validating their interests; their trust in us would deepen. Then, since we know that language arts, mathematics, and a host of other cognitive skills are inherent in incidental learning and nonacademic experiences, developing them on school time would more likely translate into increased "school" learning potential.

Empowering students to control their everyday destinies would undoubtedly cause many adolescents to flounder, tread academic water, or attempt a million different strokes. For some it wouldn't matter; they would become the same dysfunctional adults. Inevitably, some would sink. (It goes without saying that our educational mainstream is currently full of nonswimmers.)

Put into practice, such an educational conception might mean that for long periods of time youngsters would refuse contact with pencil and paper, texts (How many good books do you know that are texts, anyway?); or higher mathematics. If all root impulses were honored, communities could conceivably be overrun with diabolical hordes of teenagers, or at another extreme, young people might choose to pursue the interest of no interest. If youngsters did nothing but sleep, walk the streets, or remain epoxied to the TV, we would need to find some way, barring violation of person and property, to let it be. Just as we would need to be ready *when and if* they turned off the tube, came up off the curb, summoned up the conviction to reenter an educational institution, and said, "I'm ready. I want to learn about news reporting, sheet metal, dentistry, or drums."

This concept of schooling brings upon itself a tempest of condemnation because it seems impossible to implement. Aside from resizing the

whole social fabric, it would make staggering demands on our present pedagogical institutions, wreak political havoc, precipitate economic suicide, and assure us complex and profound personal dislocations. Its limitations are so awesome that the idea (Ivan Illich and I) would be dismissed to the lunatic fringe. With good reason—it's too wild to work.

But what I'm really saying is that we would do well to reexamine the quality of motivation that must accompany a successful school learning experience in light of what we know about learning in more natural, spontaneous settings.

To nourish a strong, full growing personality means to begin trusting students' more immediate proclivities and to become genuinely responsive to them. It means students' gaining an authority over themselves they never knew they didn't have—and our having enough patience to allow the immaturities, misjudgments, and distractions of adolescents to correct themselves.

It means envisioning school as a base not for trial intellectual runs but for ever-extending, true enabling acts—and having the patience to see this proposal fully take root. It means being sufficiently open minded to recognize its virtues when they appear.

Once we use the interests of young people to approximate more closely the natural conditions for learning; once they have something at stake that deeply matters; and once they grapple with the natural and logical consequences of their *real world choices*, I trust we have the true requisites for schooling.

And there's nothing like teaching a kid who wants to learn. ■

In order to clarify obligations, improve staff skills, dispel myths, and specify resources, a single volume has been prepared to meet the specific needs of four groups of individuals involved in delivery of services required under P.L. 94-142.

Clarification of P.L. 94-142 for the Administrator (\$5)

Clarification of P.L. 94-142 for the Special Educator (\$5)

Clarification of P.L. 94-142 for the Classroom Teacher (\$3)

Clarification of P.L. 94-142 for the Paraprofessional/Support Staff (\$3)

Written in a direct, informative manner, presented in an easy-to-use format, and tailored to the specific information needs of its audience, each book contains (1) an explanation of key provisions of the law; (2) a question-and-answer section; (3) a series of suggested activities to enhance skills, knowledge, and sensitivities; (4) a restatement, in readily understandable terms, of the most relevant sections of the regulations; and (5) an annotated bibliography of resources, referral agencies, and suggested readings. Order from:



Research for Better Schools, Inc., 444 North Third Street, Philadelphia, PA 19123 Tel. (215) 574-9300
Multiple copies available at reduced rates. Orders under \$25 must be prepaid. Unpaid orders must be accompanied by a purchase order. Brochures available.

**A SERIES OF BOOKS
TO HELP YOU FULFILL
THE PROMISE
OF P.L. 94-142**



Copyright © 1980 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.