

The Kotter Key Is No Joke!

According to research, disadvantaged students do prefer accepting, flexible teachers.

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In the November 1980 *Educational Leadership* Simon Johnson responded to my article, "The Kotter Key to Educating Disadvantaged Students" (Benedict, April 1980). In the original article, I reported that accepting, affectionate, flexible teachers were preferred by disadvantaged students. The style of Kotter, from the popular television series, "Welcome Back, Kotter," seemed to fit the style of this preferred teacher. I suggested that teachers working with disadvantaged students might want to emulate this preferred style.

Johnson's central objection to my report was that he has found no indication that the teaching style depicted by Kotter is a "key" to educating disadvantaged students. He questioned the appropriateness of basing my report on a sample of 25 students; suggested that disadvantaged students are untrustworthy evaluators of their experience; and claimed that the variables named "consideration" and "structure" were inadequately operationalized in this study.

I concede his point regarding the "consideration" and "structure" variables—deleting these labels doesn't

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diminish my findings. I disagree, however, with his contention that disadvantaged students are untrustworthy evaluators of their experience. Evidence that student evaluations of their experience are highly important and reliable appear frequently in the literature (Amatora, 1952, 1954; Cook and Leeds, 1947; Fetterhoff, 1954; Williams, 1954; Gazda, 1974).

Johnson's criticism of my sample size of 25 is unjustified. Tests of correlational significance are more stringent for small samples. That correlations in this study (as high as .82) survived these rigors is reason enough to take them seriously.

He is disturbed by my finding that students prefer their experiences with teachers who plan their curriculums in *less* detail. To clarify, I administered the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (1962) to the teachers from the original study. I found the "most contributing" teachers preferring a flexible, spontaneous way of life (P scores). "Least contributing" teachers expressed a preference for a planned, decided, orderly way of life (J scores).

It appears that the students in this study were expressing a strong preference for their experiences with teachers who relate to them with acceptance and affection and approach life (and curriculum planning) in a flexible, spontaneous way. Conversely, they expressed an aversion to experiences with teachers who hold them in low esteem or offer con-



ditional esteem at best and approach life (and curriculum planning) in a planned, decided, orderly way. If we take the students' preferences seriously and wish to be among those named "most contributing," it would be to our advantage to emulate those accepting, affectionate, flexible teachers who received that honor.

Johnson intimates that my findings are incompatible with his, or those he's familiar with. A large body of research findings reported by Brophy (1979) found individualization of instruction *not to be* a particularly potent antecedent to cognitive success. A host of reknowned researchers have adequately demonstrated that warm student-teacher relationships are associated with desirable outcomes of the educational process (Aspy, 1965, 1969; Christensen, 1960; Cogan, 1958; Davidson and Lang, 1960; Hamachek, 1969; and Stoffer, 1970). Moreover, Flanders (1964) has demonstrated that teacher indirectness, a synonym for flexibility, is associated with greater learner involvement and achievement. In a recent review of the research on teacher behavior William Martin (1979) concludes "... teachers need to be *flexible* [emphasis added]—perhaps the single word most closely associated in research with effective teaching" (p. 50). While mine was a relatively minor study, my findings are consistent with and reinforce those reported above.

I take seriously the mission of helping disenfranchised students claim the treasures of learning and growth that can enrich their lives. As I struggle in that task, in the dimness of partial understanding, I am grateful for the illumination of more information and the relief of good humor. Even though "The Kotter Key . . ." was written in a lighthearted manner, its contents can be taken seriously. ■

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