

# Teacher Growth States and School Environments

*The interaction of teacher personalities can make or break school social systems, which, in turn, foster or inhibit teacher growth.*

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Enormous differences exist in the extent to which teachers pull growth-producing experiences from their environment and exploit personal and professional activities. Some are close to their principals and draw on them for considerable assistance. Some seek out other teachers and belong to tight-knit professional groups. Some make the most of universities, and many are conference-goers and workshop-users. Variety in use of resources is omnipresent.

In a long-term inquiry into the nature of staff development in California and the professional growth of teachers, we interviewed about 300 teachers, gave questionnaires to 3,000 others, and held group discussions with several hundred more. All of these contacts explored teachers' perceptions of their states of growth with respect to teaching, academic content, curriculum, and general knowledge. Specifically, the interviews focused on teachers' (1) use of the formal system of universities, workshops, and supervisors; (2) interactions with other teachers and people in their environment; and (3) personally directed activities—their reading, consumption of the performing arts, and engagement in sports, travel, and leisure activities.

We uncovered some exciting examples of people who have reached a place in their personal and professional lives where they are intensely involved in growth-producing activities. We found a Spanish teacher who, at her own expense, spent two months in Mexico working on her language skills because she felt they were getting rusty. We found an English teacher who had created a beautiful and intense sex education course as a result of her concern about the ignorance of her students and many of her community members. We found autoshop teachers who study new developments by the major domestic and foreign automotive manufacturers. We found teachers who are deeply reflective about their teaching and delight in interchanges with others. We also found teachers who are insulated from interchange that might affect the way they view themselves and their students.

## Categories of "Growth States"

Gradually, we developed categories for describing these individuals. The terms of our classifications are reminiscent of Maslow's descriptions of psychological states and manifest his considerable influence on our thinking. In colloquial terms, they are:

### Philby

Philby has taught for 30 years. He grew up in the mountain states, the child of migrant fruit pickers, and attended as many as four schools a year in his childhood.

After graduating from a state college, Philby moved to the rural area of California where his life revolves around teaching and a second full-time job as a real estate salesman. He also collects cut glass and antiques and travels about the country looking for them when he can.

Philby likes to be left alone in his elementary classroom, and prefers administrators who

"keep out of his hair" and other people "off his back." Textbooks structure what he teaches. To stay out of a rut, he changes grade levels every few years. He resents inservice workshops that take him or any other teacher out of the classroom. Occasionally, he enrolls in a "short course" at the local university.

The last time Philby watched someone else teach was 15 years ago; he feels no need to repeat the experience.

Philby's second job leaves him with little time to read, attend films, or plays. His collections are his primary leisure activity.

1. Omnivores
2. Active Consumers
3. Passive Consumers
4. Resistant
5. Withdrawn

We describe teachers' activities in three domains: use of formal staff development opportunities, interchange with other professionals within the informal system of the school and district, and activities initiated in their private lives. Few people maintain the same "growth state" across all three domains, although some do. However, few behave in widely discrepant states across the domains. The matrix of states and domains is depicted in Figure 1.

We describe the most active people as "total omnivores."

*Omnivores.* These people actively use every available aspect of the formal and informal systems that are available to them. Their lives are rich with books, the performing arts, travel, sports, university courses, and the offerings of teacher centers and districts. They have found professional colleagues with whom they are close and interchange ideas. They actively attempt to improve the schools in which they work. They

simply will not be denied. They appear to be able to overcome obstacles, and they do not carry emotional baggage that prevents them from profiting from a great variety of activities. They do not spend energy complaining about colleagues, administration, poor presenters at workshops, and so on. They simply take what they can where they can get it, which does not mean they are indis-

criminate—their energy is simply oriented toward their growth rather than toward impediments to it. They tend to be happy and self-actualizing people. Teaching has not jaded them nor has the rest of life. The Partial Omnivore has the same characteristics but over only one or two domains of activity.

Beulah has been at Parker School for 10 years, where she has taught 3rd, 4th,

**Figure 1. Growth States and Domains: Possible Configurations.**

	Formal Systems	Domains Informal Interchange	Personal Patterns
Omnivores			
Active Consumers			
Passive Consumers			
Resistant			
Withdrawn			

### Mary Anne

Mary Anne has lived in both urban and rural areas. She graduated from a leading urban university and for 15 years has taught high school English. She sponsors the school newspaper and drama group, both of which require before- and after-school time.

Mary Anne has just finished writing a collection of short stories and teaches creative writing at the local university. A writing project sponsored by the county office of education has stimulated her greatly. Through the local community college, she is now offering college level courses to

high school students, and works closely with professors of writing there and at the university.

She is an officer of the regional professional organization in her specialty and regularly attends the workshops it sponsors. As department chair in her school, she greatly enjoys visiting other teachers' classrooms. Her own class is visited often, but by fewer fellow department members than she would like, mainly because of scheduling problems. She sees very little of teachers not in her specialty.

Mary Anne's primary inspiration comes from her students. She believes that successful

teaching requires continuous personal and professional growth.

Philby and Mary Anne live in the same area, teach in the same district, and have essentially the same environments to draw from. Philby is consumed by his personal economic activity and stands aloof from colleagues, professional staff development activities, literature, and the arts. Mary Anne has wedded personal and professional life. Her writing, teaching, and learning about writing and teaching are closely connected, and she explores the environment voraciously in her search for growth.

***"It is virtually impossible for the formal system of a school whose informal system operates at a survival level to be open and permeable."***

and 5th grades and is now teaching 6th. She works in a school that has weekly staff development activities. She has three grown children, one at a state university and two at the local community college.

She has many interests—she skis, backpacks with her husband, plays the piano, sews, and reads. She just finished reading the Castañeda series. "My kids usually give me books as presents."

When she was asked about her connection with colleges she said, "I'm always going to take classes." Recently she took courses in Shakespeare and astronomy. When I asked about astronomy, she told me her son had become interested in it and she wanted to be able to talk to him. She wants to take a psychology course for the same reason, and has designed an astronomy unit for her 6th graders.

When asked about the purpose of staff development, she said that she used it as a refresher. "It tells me what new programs are around and gives me an opportunity to think." She said a recent multicultural workshop was useful because "it is a reminding tap on the shoulder."

With a nearby university and the high school that Parker School feeds into, Beulah is working on composition skills with the goal of reducing the number of students who have to take "bonthead" English at the university. Of observing other classrooms, Beulah says, "It helps a teacher to keep up, to keep from being overwhelmed, and gives a sense of community with other teachers."

Beulah ended our conversation by saying the children will learn what you teach them. "It's up to you. If you have lots to teach, they will learn lots."

#### FRAN

Fran has been teaching for 13 years, three at her current school. She became acquainted with the principal in a course they were taking. When her husband was transferred, she called up the principal and found an opening.

Fran sees inservice offerings much like a "smorgasbord—you have to pick and choose what you might be able to use." However, she believes that a certain number of workshops should be mandatory, "because those that you want to be there might well not come. It doesn't hurt to have some things selected for you."

She occasionally takes courses but receives most of her growth from the staff development workshops and from talking to other teachers. Although she

seldom observes other teachers she said, "Very few teachers sit alone in their rooms during breaks. They are usually talking to each other about what they do."

Fran enjoys films and some reading but generally spends her nonschool time doing "household" things.

*Passive Consumers.* Another state is exemplified by persons who are *there* when opportunity presents itself but who rarely seek or initiate new activities. Thus if the formal system becomes active, it will tend to draw them to greater activity. If their families engage in much reading and theater-going, they will tend to go along, and they may be pulled into workshops or other activities by peers or supervisors. However, they are dependent on the activity levels outside of them to draw them into the activity. If they are in a low-energy informal system, they will tend to interact relatively little. If their district maintains a strong formal system, they will engage in its offerings. Some people are passive consumers in one or two domains and active in another. We have met a few Partial Omnivores who are passive in the domains where they are not omnivorous.

#### JANE

Jane has been a third-grade teacher at South Bay School for 11 years. Her classroom is always filled with materials, and she provides opportunities for her students that aren't available in many physical education programs, including a tumbling unit. She does a series of art projects throughout the year, which has given her quite a positive reputation among parents. She has students from the local state college science department bring reptile and insect collections to her class, to the delight of most of her students.

Jane occasionally takes a course from a college or university and attends workshops given by a professor who flies into the Bay Area. (One of the recent titles was "20 Bulletin Board Ideas.") She attends regional inservice activities but generally does not seek out new procedures or materials, "because my program is filled. I don't know how I would use them even when they seem to be neat things."

Jane is generally seen as a show-off by her colleagues. She talks to two other teachers to some extent, who send children to her for the tumbling unit. Most of their conversations are short interchanges over logistics or upcoming events in the school.

***"Schools with weak formal systems and negatively oriented informal systems operate under conditions that work against change."***

With respect to the outdoors, Jane is an active consumer or omnivore. She likes camping and backpacking and goes as often as she can. She has held "camp-outs" on school grounds on a Friday night each of the last two years. She attends an occasional play.

Perhaps in a different environment Jane would be a more active consumer of the formal or informal system, but at South Bay she has settled in and does her own thing. Even though she is in a somewhat hostile setting she has no intention of transferring because she "is allowed to do what I want and I like the kids, particularly when I have more than one child from the same family."

*The Resistant.* Some teachers manifest a state we term "entrenchment" in one or more domains. When in that state in the formal domain they are not likely to seek out training. Where they do take training it is likely to be in areas where they already are feeling successful. For example, they have a management system that they are satisfied with but will take "Taming the Tornado in the Classroom." They will seldom take courses unless there is a material benefit, such as a salary increment. Innovations that change the way the school's curriculum operates are usually viewed with suspicion, particularly if they might result in a change that would suggest current classroom practices are inadequate. Change to them means they are not doing a good job and therefore are threatened. When in that state they may see themselves as one of the best teachers in the school. Any question of current practice will generally be rebuffed. In the informal domain, entrenched teaching is manifested by the use of the informal system of the school to control and stifle. They are likely to do this in one of three ways:

- Actively oppose
- Surreptitiously oppose (using their position in the informal systems to intimidate and indirectly veto)
- Withdraw (building a fortress around their classroom usually saying something like "I already do that in my classroom").

Totally resistant persons sometimes, in conversations, appear to be operating at the middle of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In fact, they may "talk" the self-actualizing "game"; but when something alters the way the school functions, they revert to a survival orientation bent on sublimating anything that threatens their position.

*The Withdrawn.* People in a withdrawn state require a great deal of outside energy if they are to become involved. They may push away activity in one or more domains, either avoiding the formal system where they can, engaging in relatively few activities that they generate themselves and participating relatively rarely in the informal interaction scene of their workplace. A few are withdrawn in all three domains.

At this point we would hesitate to speculate about the number of persons who fall into each category, especially because more withdrawn people tend to be difficult to interview. Also, we have frequently been deceived in the early stages of interviews, especially with respect to the personal domain. Some people who are withdrawn or passive in the formal and informal domains have turned out to be relatively active in the personal domains.

There are relatively obvious implications to this system of classifications. The omnivores generate considerable energy for themselves and exploit opportunities that are created for them. The active consumers become involved easily. The passive consumers and the withdrawn not only initiate little but are difficult to involve—they consume energy.

Although we are by no means certain, we believe there is a relationship between these levels and the psychological states as described by Maslow. We can obviously compare the omnivores to the self-actualizing state and the withdrawn to the patterns of survival-level persons. Whether or not there is a direct connection, the effect of being in a state of psychological survival and being withdrawn from major growth producing dimensions of one's environment are virtually the same. An individual who is withdrawn is exposed to much less stimuli than people who are not and lives much more alone, which tends to reduce the disposition toward risk taking and probably results in a relatively low level of growth.

**GRACE**

Grace has been teaching for 22 years, the last 13 in the second grade at the same school. She supervises the school choir. With the exception of another second-grade teacher, who is her closest friend both in and outside of school, Grace has for all practical purposes no contact with other faculty members except for the principal who, like her, came to the school when it opened. She takes breaks and eats lunch with her

friend. She is cordial to the other teachers but seldom speaks at faculty meetings. Little is known about what she does with the exception that some students in each class are in her choir.

Grace attends required inservice workshops but seeks out none. When a major federal staff development project was proposed for South Bay School, a meeting was convened at her house. Grace and a few others opposed the project. They went individually to the principal to object to its coming. He assured them that although the project would come to the school, they could pick and choose what they wanted. Grace was satisfied. In the four years of the project she attended all of the schoolwide activities held during faculty meeting time. Generally, she sat through the workshops without trying out any of the ideas or materials presented to her. She tried out a concept-development activity and enjoyed its game-like nature as a change of pace, but did not see it as relevant to her basic instructional program.

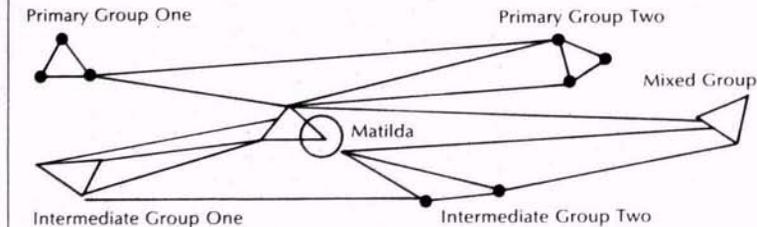
Her family is fully grown. She and her husband live quietly and pleasantly. She is active in her church, playing the organ on Sunday. They read magazines, an occasional book, and take in a film once in a while. They have no regular leisure or athletic program. They travel occasionally.

### Social Influence, Self-Concept, and State as a Learner

Not only do individuals in the same environments respond differently to the same opportunities, but there are considerable differences in the energy levels of the social environments of schools. Those environments interact with the individual's predispositions to influence the amount of growth-producing activity that will go on. We have conducted a long-term formal investigation of the social ecology of one school and a number of briefer and somewhat more informal investigations on which the following concepts are built.

The South Bay School was the site of a four-year investigation that focused on the effectiveness of a variety of inservice education and on the receptivity of the school to innovations that originated both from within and outside the school. Portions of interviews conducted with both administrators and teachers explored the extent to which individuals felt efficacious in the environment and understood and felt that it was possible for them to generate initiatives.

**Figure 2.**  
**Diagram of Friendship Groups in**  
**South Bay School.**



There was a curious unanimity in the staff on a number of important issues. First of all, each of the staff members and the principal felt that it was relatively easy for individual teachers to bring about a change within their classrooms. The principal supported most attempts and would make resources available whenever possible. There was a feeling of trust that would sustain the period during which any new practice was being implemented. However, each staff member felt that it would be virtually impossible to bring about any kind of change on a scale larger than the individual classroom. It appeared to be very difficult for teachers to get together and engage in concerted action, even in groups of two's and three's. They all agreed that it would be impossible to bring about a change on a schoolwide basis, whether it was initiated by a teacher, an administrator, or anyone else.

The interaction between teachers and the principal was interesting to observe. The principal appeared to have excellent dyadic relations. On a one-to-one basis, he and each individual teacher appeared to be friendly and respectful and have a relatively easy level of interchange. However, faculty meetings were painful to observe or participate in. Members of the faculty could be seen talking and laughing on their way to the meeting and interacting easily with the principal, but once inside the meeting room the atmosphere became formal and stilted. Proposals were greeted with stony silence, guest speakers were treated with bare civility and responded to only minimally, and the content of discussion of proposals was filled with obstacles and problems. Usually no action was taken except perhaps to refer the matter to a committee.

Observation of the interaction between the faculty members resulted in a sociogram that is depicted roughly in Figure 2.

Most of the members of the faculty had relatively close interchange with two or three other individuals. There was a tendency for primary teachers and intermediate teachers to consort with others at the same level, although there were some exceptions, and the communications networks converged on one triad of teachers, the most influential member of which we will call Matilda. Matilda had achieved the position of "gatekeeper" of the social system. She used that position to discredit initiatives for innovation that came from any and all sources. Ridicule was her primary device. If a teacher would describe something she was doing, Matilda would suggest that the person was showing off and "isn't it too bad that she has that need when she's such a basically nice person." When a staff member came back from a workshop with an idea, she would generally ridicule the idea and suggest that "we all know how Tommy is. Once in a while he gets a bee in his bonnet, but it will pass." Curriculum initiatives from the principal's office were greeted similarly. Matilda was a master at suggesting that whatever was being suggested was simply a new version of something that had been tried before and been found wanting.

The result of Matilda's activity was that all of the teachers and the principal had heard ideas suggested by the others being held up to ridicule; worse, they had stood for the ridicule of their friends' ideas. The alienating effect on the informal system of the group was profound. When any individual or group came up with an idea, they could be sure that Matilda would cut it down

and that their friends would permit that to happen. Thus, by the time an idea came to a meeting, the issue had already been decided—not in a formal decision-making process, but in an informal system governed by a negative gatekeeper. Matilda could not initiate anything herself, but was extremely effective at diminishing the effects of any initiative made by another person. The principal was not very skilled in handling the faculty as a group and his pleasant dyadic interactions with the staff had little effect on the overall normative structure that had developed.

As time passed, it was possible to make a clearer and clearer assessment of Matilda's personality. Matilda is classically "resistant." Although she advertised herself as the best teacher in the school, her teaching was in fact dull and monotonous. As more and more attempts were made to liven the environment of the school, the nature of her increasing overt resistance made it clear that Matilda was frightened of innovation. We concluded that a resistant person had become the most powerful person in the informal system and was using her power to protect herself and, hence, insulate the entire school from attempts to improve it. Not until Matilda's position in the social system was changed could there be sustained attempts at staff development or curriculum and instructional innovation in that school environment. Collective action was impossible as long as Matilda remained the "gatekeeper" of avenues to innovation.

In our investigations of the social systems of a variety of other schools, we have concluded that not only is there considerable variety in receptivity to innovation, but that the informal social system is a powerful determining factor. Some have formal systems that are quite open and permit new activities to be generated and sustained. In other cases, the formal systems do not function smoothly enough to permit more than individual activity to take place on a sustained basis. Similarly, the informal systems of some schools are relatively open and outreaching. These can be characterized as self-actualizing in a collective sense, whereas others are at a comfort level or even, as in the case of the South Bay School, at a survival level. It is virtually impossible for the formal system of a school whose informal system operates at a survival level to be open and permeable.

Thus the spectrum of possibilities is

as follows: We find some schools with open and strong formal systems that also have open and strong informal systems. In those schools there is a free interchange of ideas; ideas from outside are considered and taken on their merits, and considerable energy is expended in self development. Warm informal interchange fosters more growth-producing activities by individuals, small groups, and faculty as a whole, and their efforts are facilitated by the support of the strong, formal system. Schools with weak formal systems and negatively oriented informal systems operate under conditions that work against change. There is considerably less activity, and individuals tend to be covert about their personal efforts. (In the extremely negative environments it may be difficult for individuals even to admit that they are in a high state of growth. Persons like Matilda ridicule their efforts and isolate them from their fellows.)

This, we believe, accounts for the wide varieties of receptions we have observed with respect to initiatives to improve the school. Implementation of Public Law 94-142 is an example. In the most positive environments the resources provided by the law, effectively utilized, and the provisions of the law itself are regarded as opportunities for enhancing the education of all the children. In schools with weak formal and negative informal systems, there is virtually a phobic reaction to the possibility of working with children having special needs; the use of resources is haphazard and stilted; and the initiatives, rather than resulting in productive energy, create difficulty and awkwardness.

One of our case study schools has a relatively powerful system and a solid and affirmative informal system. Initiatives in many areas, including special education, Title I, and Bilingual Education are utilized to a fare-thee-well. There is a strong interchange between teachers and principal and teachers and teachers. Aides are used effectively. Resource specialists interact productively with teachers, and there is a strong formal inservice program and a great deal of individual activity.

Other schools are moderately energizing and the environments of some are actually depressing. Currently we classify schools as either highly energizing, maintaining, or depressant.

The first type activate the energy of individuals, the second are supportive but not synergistic, and the last generate obstacles to the release of energy.

### **The Interaction Between Individuals in the Social System**

Obviously individuals are both affected by and part of social systems. Matches and mismatches can be dramatic. Omnivores are stimulated by energizing schools and add to the stimulation that is already present. Withdrawn people can be terribly threatened by an energizing environment; they are likely to be overwhelmed by the power of the social system to which they are exposed. They will have to either become more active or find some way of leaving the situation. At the other extreme, a self-actualizing person who runs into a relatively dormant environment is likely to be appalled. This individual is also likely to be isolated within the social system where his or her normal mode of behavior will be perceived as abnormal to the depressant environment. All the other interacting possibilities exist as well, of course. A withdrawn individual who joins a depressant environment is likely to feel at home and is also likely not to be stimulated to higher levels of activity. A self-actualizing teacher who joins an energized environment is likely to be thrilled beyond words especially if he or she has been living in a relatively dormant environment.

### **Implications: A Program for Psychological and Ecological States**

The implications, in our long struggle to improve the environments in which teachers work, are probably totally obvious. Initiatives by teacher centers, county offices, districts, states, and the federal government are going to interact with environments and individuals as different as the ones we have described. In some environments and with some individuals, they will find fertile ground while with others they will have an uphill fight even to a minimal level of implementation.

We urge the consideration of two strains of staff development that are directly related to the individuals and the groups we've described. Both involve attention to the improvement of the social system. Part of this can be accomplished through means that have been generated by organizational development specialists in the last few years. Others require the development of personnel who might also be considered social therapists, skilled in creating a new social system, understanding it, and helping the individuals in it create a system oriented toward self-actualization. **EL**

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