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OVERVIEW

SECRETS OF SUCCESS

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In this issue Merrill Harmin (p. 43) tells of an inner-city school where students are prospering; what he saw on a visit there convinced him that the students, nearly all poor and black, are developing "a sense of personal worth, of being able to live life intelligently."

In just a year, Harmin reports, Danneel School in New Orleans was transformed from a typical troubled slum school into a place where everyone treats everyone else with courtesy and respect, where students are "remarkably busy at learning tasks." It's true. I was so intrigued by Harmin's enthusiasm that I too visited the school, and what I saw in my brief visit confirmed Harmin's impressions.

The source of this change? An unusual approach called The Workshop Way by its developer, Grace Pilon of Xavier University. The widely used program has many innovative features, including a passionate emphasis on the positive. Teachers do not scold, punish, or correct students. Instead, they expect them to behave "intelligently."

The Workshop Way bears some resemblance to an even more unorthodox program (this one used in only a few schools) known as Individual Education (p. 52). Concerned that common school practices inhibit student initiative and responsibility, psychologist Raymond Corsini designed a set of procedures that demand self-regulation. Although a teacher may signal a disruptive student to leave her classroom, students are otherwise free to go to any classroom whenever they wish.

Most parents and educators would reject Corsini's ideas as unworkable, even irresponsible. And despite the appeal of The Workshop Way, it will not be universally accepted either. But these and other groundbreaking programs show that conventional school arrangements are not inviolable.

We must be open to new arrangements because in our relations with children, we educators are inconsistent. We coax and prod, claiming that we want students to "be all that they can be." But we accept and work within structures built on the old assumption that only a few will learn really well. We assign students to grade levels and retain them if they don't measure up. We categorize them as remedial and compensatory, putting them in classes that often discourage self-direction.

That must change. Success for all our students is now more than a romantic ideal; it is a political and economic necessity. With changing demographics and rising societal demands, we must find ways to educate more of the children who usually fail.

Those educators not ready to embrace drastically different approaches may be willing to consider the views of mainstream authorities who recommend less extreme changes. Michael Knapp and his coauthors (p. 4) summarize what have been regarded as desirable practices and suggest more promising alternatives gleaned from current research and theory. For example, rather than trying to teach basic skills first in small steps and only then having students apply the skills to practical problems, teachers should "provide a context for skill learning that establishes clear reasons for needing to learn the skills, affords opportunities to apply the skills, and helps students relate one skill to another." (This "new direction" is hardly new, but attention to context and meaningfulness is unfortunately lacking in too many classrooms.)

An example of this approach is Reading Recovery, a highly effective program for primary children having difficulty learning to read. Gay Su Pinnell (p. 17) notes that Reading Recovery is expensive; it requires thorough teacher training and one-to-one tutoring. But it offers a way for many children to get a fresh start at a crucial point in their school careers.

Reading Recovery embodies sensible applications of knowledge about human motivation. Margaret Clifford (p. 22) points out that teachers who praise poor work or who assign work that is obviously too easy may be contributing to students' *negative* self-images. Kay Alderman (p. 27) explains that a person's self-concept is shaped not only by success or failure itself but by one's view of his or her ability, effort, and luck in relation to the difficulty of the task.

Here, then, is a critical ingredient not only of the programs described in this issue but of any effort to make students more successful: over time, the students must come to understand and assume responsibility for the role they play in their own success. □

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