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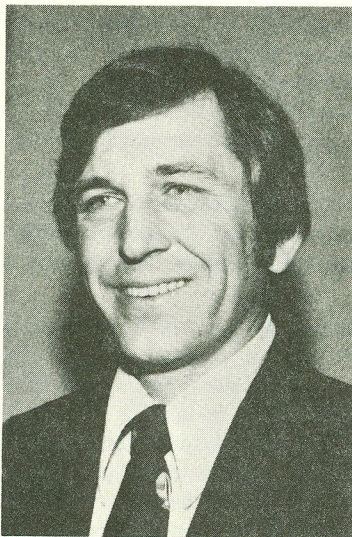
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Martin conducted a year-long anthropological field study of an alternative secondary school program emphasizing outdoor experiences.

open experiential education in the high school

by Bill Martin



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In several scattered spots around the country, educators have been investigating the ways in which the principles and methods of the open classroom can be applied to the secondary school. Although the number of experiments is growing and research efforts continue, little is yet known about how effective these often unique types of education might be. This article summarizes a one-year research study of the behavior and operations of one such innovation, a curriculum option available within a comprehensive public high school in Fairfield, Connecticut.

Change Emerged From Conflict

Called Operation Turn-On, the program began six years ago as an effort to solve a continuing problem of boredom, non-participation and aggressive vandalism among a worrisome number of high school students. Approximately thirty of the most disaffected eleventh grade boys were assigned to a well respected male English teacher for half of the school day. No additional funds, beyond his salary, were requested or spent. Traditional academic and vocational curricula were abandoned at the out-set when the teacher consulted the boys about how they perceived school and what they thought would meet their needs. When the students reported that they wished to leave school, the teacher indicated that this would be possible if certain conditions were agreed to. What followed was a year-long quid-pro-quo between students and teacher. Their emerging curriculum included fairly frequent hiking and bicycling adventures which served as the basis for most of the in-school learning. The teacher's goal of each activity remained consistent with the goals that the parent school held for all students. What differed were the methods.

Six years later, the program now selects sixty juniors and seniors, both boys and girls, possessing differing degrees of social, academic and physical abilities. They are team-taught for four periods each day by the same English teacher, now joined by a woman science teacher and a social studies teacher who devotes half of his teaching load to the program. The staff still remains committed to the learning potential offered by the adventurous tripping experiences of backpacking, winter camping, bicycling and canoeing. The purpose of these trips is to provide a vehicle for learning by doing, a curriculum which virtually assures involvement, activity and participation for each student.

Change In Individual Students

Each aspect of the bi-monthly trips, including raising all money needed for any activity, is predominantly planned and executed by the students, sometimes within groups, at other times with the entire learning community. Naturally, such close cooperation produces both errors and personality conflicts. The staff members exert their guidance to prevent miscalculations which could prove to be either dangerous or destructive to the development of the group. But, they also believe that minor errors and interpersonal conflict, if used thoughtfully, can provide feedback to help students discover their weaknesses and strengths as a group and as individuals. What begins in the autumn as a chaotic confusion of individuals, unable to plan effectively or communicate well, gradually becomes a group which is much more adept at goal setting and problem solving. Individuals who enter the year with inadequate skills at public speaking, listening or working with others seem generally to improve as they gain more experience and self confidence.

Periodically, formal and informal dialogue between teachers and students focuses on the individual's personal learning goals, the functioning of the whole group and on the nature of his or her participation within it.

Diversified But Also Integrated

Although the staff members believe that fostering positive self-esteem is a critical part of teaching the whole child, their concern for affective development is integrated with other, more commonly acknowledged and taught-for goals. Each student must prepare him or herself physically and academically for each out-of-school experience. For example, during the weeks prior to the four day fall backpacking trip held at the peak of autumn color, the entire group ran or bicycled for several miles on most days, keeping individual records on physical performance and improvement. The science teacher then incorporated these records into her unit on the human body and the principles of nutrition. During the same period of time, the English teacher provided an introduction to descriptive writing and to the literature related to the outdoors, focussing on Frost and Thoreau. For physical education credit, in addition to the conditioning and occasional coed games of soccer or football, each student was to be certified in emergency first aid.

Following the trip, a considerable amount of written impression of feelings and observations connected with the experience was made. A major research paper was also written on topics as diverse as edible wild foods of the New England mountains, or the lives of hawks, or early New England architecture, all individually selected topics which related to the direct outdoor experience. The results of these academic efforts were then shared in small groups, subjected to peer criticism and offered for the learning of others.

There appeared to be an unusually great amount of belief among the members of the group that these activities and methods were worthwhile and effective. The student-teacher adversary relationship, so detrimental in many classrooms, seemed to be replaced by an affective closeness with a high degree of communication and interaction between staff and students. Undeniably, each participant was given considerable freedom and was perceived and treated as an individual. Behavioral observations, permanent records, and interviews

with parents, students, teachers and counselors all consistently seemed to indicate that individual changes in skill and behavior did occur.

Complexity of Variables

In attempting to formulate a reasonable explanation for the impact on the students' behavior and involvement, the research attempted to isolate the principle social forces in operation:

1. The members of the class were all involved in a great number of adventuresome and occasionally stressful activities which occurred frequently through the year. Though success was virtually assured, each student found himself at some point beyond his comfort zone, making the experiences vivid and memorable.
2. The student role contained a high degree of responsibility for the success or failure of the various activities.
3. There was an expanded and diversified system of status and rewards available for differing types of contributions.
4. There was both dependence upon and control by peers.
5. There was open and horizontal communication flow between students and significant adult success models. Personal leadership style among staff permitted teacher control of the class agenda, but also allowed and encouraged empathetic dialogue and counseling.
6. The keeping of cumulative personal records of goals and performance, checked periodically with staff guidance, involved students in noticing and acting upon their own personal growth and achievement. The evaluation of individual performance was done in an atmosphere of acceptance and objectivity, avoiding threat and judgementalness.
7. The visibility and uniqueness of the program produced external skeptics who in turn, stimulated students to protectively support the program. Undoubtedly, there is also a Hawthorne effect.
8. The program is housed within a school which extended a high degree of autonomy to this particular staff. The teachers were free to design curriculum, to develop their own evaluation procedures, and to award academic credit. Blanket permission was given to leave the building, following notice to the office, thus permitting freedom from the bell schedule and atmosphere of the school. Communication flow was relatively open and horizontal between teachers, administrators and guidance people.

Any System Operates With Continuing Tensions

The goals of the program were to promote individualized, involved learning which integrated physical, affective, and academic activity. It appears that for most students, the mixture was successful in gaining their involvement, enthusiastic support. But, any social system designed to produce certain effects will promote unintended consequences which become lingering problems:

1. The visibility and uniqueness tends to stimulate confusion and hostility among some very conservative teachers and among some students outside the program.
2. Since the students were free to take up to two other classes from other parts of the school and to engage in extra

curricular activities, conflicts occasionally arose over time taken for the longer trips.

3. In some cases, student freedom led to evasion of the formal rules and regulations of the school concerning smoking and unsupervised leaving of the building. The incidence of this did not appear to exceed other groups.
4. Some students tended to become less tolerant of other classes which are more traditional or future-oriented in their rewards. Some occasionally adopted a disdainful attitude towards some parts of the school's activities and rules and regulations.
5. The closeness of the student-student and student-teacher interaction revealed a very small number of personality problems, all of which predated the program and had interfered with the student's past performance in school. This ultimately proved to be useful because it led to professional counseling for the students involved.
6. The time and effort related to the trips required the staff to spend four weeks during the year away from their families.

Additionally, home visitations, planning, coordination, and public speaking required an enormous amount of time and dedication. Very few teachers would have been able to devote the same amount of effort expended to sustain the same intensity of program.

More Experiential Education in the future

In summary, the research revealed that it was feasible to design and operate a high school curriculum based upon group-experiencing of outdoor learning. The program represents a novel approach to methods of achieving the traditional breadth of goals generally held for high school students. Recognizing that no system can avoid problems unique to its organization, it still appears that such education can be both vivid and effective. Further research needs to be done into effects upon personality, self concept and physical fitness for participants as well as into the longitudinal effects upon students. Even so, the growth of similar programs is occurring rapidly and it appears that schools will continue to experiment with open and adventurous options within their secondary curricular offerings.

the educational pendulum swings to the national mood

The American people have followed an uncertain and winding road in their quest for education. Reforms that were billed as new and revolutionary often were, in fact, merely a return to earlier experimentation. Attitudes toward what was right or wrong in pedagogy frequently followed extreme swings in the pendulum of the national mood. Reform movements almost invariably tended to follow not a straight line of progress or retrogression, but the near-circular path of the spiral, revisiting familiar ground while gradually moving ahead. Time and again, new ideas and arrangements, though intended to liberate from old rigidities, soon became standardized by their proponents' insistence that they had found the "one best way."

Growing Up In America by Fred M. and Grace Hechinger. McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1975, page 3.