

Choice as a Way to Quality Learning

Nancy Reckinger

School districts should let parents, students, and teachers establish alternative schools to accommodate differences in learning styles.

Thomas Edison must have been a kinesthetic learner. He grew up in a rural midwestern area where stories circulated of how "terrible" he had been in school. Finally he blew the school up, accidentally, and was kicked out. There were no choices for him within the school system. Fortunately, there were alternative ways for him to develop his talents.

Alternative means another way, a choice. If the traditional way of learning turns students on, helps them grow, enables them to be all they are intended to be, they do not need an alternative. But if they are oral learners, kinesthetic learners, independent learners, or any of the many other combinations of diverse elements that make up personality and learning styles, their chances of getting through the traditional system with their self-esteem intact are close to zero.

Auditory Learners-Failures

Seventy to 80 percent of the youths in juvenile detention facilities are auditory learners, according to Thomas Taglianetti, executive director of California Youth Homes, and he blames schools for those figures. "What we do with these kids is to underscore their failings (to read) and by that convert them into failures. American schools take the attitude that failing a lot makes you a failure," he is quoted as saying.[1]

Approximately 62 percent of our student population does not function well in the traditional school, partly because they do not have traditional learning styles and personalities.[2]

[1] Thomas Taglianetti. Reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1977. Part i, p. 1.

[2] Marilyn Bates and David W. Keirsey. *Please Understand Me!* Fullerton: California State University, 1975.

Over one-third of our population does not make it through high school. Many of them are forced out of school after years of frustration and failure, having learned they were not as good as traditional students.[3] Both their self-esteem and their spirit have been stifled. Strangely enough, 38 percent learn best through activity. Not so strangely, this group has the lowest correlation between academic ability and grade point average and, consequently, are often those who drop out of school.[4]

In spite of these statistics, there are still few alternative school programs for the students who learn best in nontraditional ways, and traditional schools are doing them more harm than good by forcing them into a mold that does not fit. As society provides fewer acceptable ways for these students to become adults and exerts more pressure on them to stay in school, we see evidence of their anger and frustration in violence, vandalism, and truancy.

Alternative Schools

Yet, there are some school programs that meet their needs. In optional alternative schools, violence, vandalism, and truancy are not problems.[5] Horizon High School in Bakersfield, California, has a 98 percent average daily attendance of students who were once dropouts or close to being forced out. On an objective civics exam without the benefit of traditional class sessions in civics, their average score was highest for any high school in their district. They learned through optional experiences in the community supplemented by seminars with teachers who had a variety of qualifications from bus driver licenses to counseling credentials.

Key elements for quality academic and personal achievement include basic skill competencies, self-esteem, problem-solving skills, learning skills, and an inner locus of control. There are many ways of developing those elements, and the easiest way for school districts to do it is to work with parents, students, and teachers—allowing them choices. California State Senator John Dunlap, who is responsible for the 1975 California legislation defining alternative schools and encouraging their development, introduced a bill in 1977 that would have required school districts to establish an alternative school if parents and students petitioned for it, if sufficient teachers agreed to teach in it, and if it would not cost more than other programs or interfere with them. That bill died in committee, but its light has not gone out. It is the kind of enabling legislation needed to free people's differences and support their dignity.

Azaleas and Cabbages

Respect for differences requires an "agricultural" model that focuses on individual nurture and cultivation due to innate needs. We use differing methods for growing cabbages and azaleas. And, there is no problem over which way is better; one isn't right and the other wrong. Anyone would call a farmer a fool who planted them in the same place and gave them the same fertilizer, sun, and water. We value each and, knowing they will not thrive unless needs are met, we respect their different natures and accept their special requirements.

When we respect the differences we know exist in people, and when we value the contributions to be gained by those differences, we shall widely and effectively provide for their nurture and cultivation, encouraging them to become all they can be.

[3] Peter F. Drucker. *Management Tasks, Responsibilities and Practice.* New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973. p. 173.

[4] Bates and Keirsey, *op. cit.*, "Teaching in S. J. Style."

[5] Daniel L. Duke and Cheryl Perry. "Can Alternative Schools Succeed Where Benjamin Spock, Spiro Agnew, and B. F. Skinner Have Failed?" Palo Alto, California: Stanford University, Spencer Foundation Study, 1977.



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