The Secret Club

James Ray Ross

Children going through the trauma of divorce often feel alone and ashamed, as we found out when we began school support groups to give children a chance to acknowledge their problems and talk about their feelings. In the very first session, when the therapist began to explain what the meeting was about, one student suddenly turned to a classmate and said, "You mean this is happening to your family, too? I thought I was the only one in the world it was happening to." Later, when the group was selecting a name, another child shyly suggested they call their group "The Secret Club," and to a person, everyone agreed enthusiastically on that name.

Such deep and private feelings are not clearly visible in classrooms, and divorcing parents rarely notify the school of the disruption in the family. What teachers and principals are likely to see is a sharp drop in a student's achievement or a sudden change in attitude. Then, when they make inquiries, they often discover that the family is breaking up. With several children in our school experiencing this trauma, my staff and I designed a program to help them over the worst of their difficulties.

With the help of Child and Family Services, a community agency, we secured private funding to cover the cost of therapists during this project. I then arranged an agreement with central office for group therapeutic services to occur during the school day at two primary schools, one intermediate school, and one middle school, all in the same neighborhood. The school counselors easily identified 10 children in each school who needed help in coping with their emotions during the family crisis. Next the counselors contacted the children's parents, informed them that a permission form was coming home, and explained the nature of the program. Two therapists then met with each group during the last period of the day, one day a week for six weeks.

The therapists' goal was to enable the children to open up, share their feelings, and discuss ways to cope with their troubles. Their techniques varied, of course, according to the age of the children. In our primary school, the therapists provided coloring books illustrating what children go through in these circumstances. As children talked about the feelings expressed in the pictures, the therapists gleaned information they needed to draw all the children into the discussion.

After the first two sessions, we asked parents from all four groups to attend a night session at the middle school. There the therapists explained problems children have in adjusting to a family breakup and described behaviors children typically exhibit during the crisis. Parents were nodding their heads in agreement; a number of them began to share concerns with each other, and a few stayed late to chat with the therapists.

To evaluate our efforts, we held debriefing sessions for teachers and central office supervisors; and we solicited feedback from parents and students in the program. The teachers noted especially their own increased awareness of the difficulties their students had encountered and their ability to respond sensitively as a result. But the students made the most rewarding comments of all, such as: "It was good to make friends" and "It made me feel better to know that other people in the school had the same problems" and "Thanks for taking the time to care."

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classes—in short, abstractions we do not have to touch. In fact, only once in *A Nation at Risk* is the word *children* used.

Seek the Child's Perspective

Thomas Jefferson, playing out one of the first schemes for public education in America, argued that the mission of schools should be to make children "useful instruments for the public." And we've been talking in these utilitarian terms ever since. Our need to "produce" these "instruments" might be why we put so much emphasis on workbooks, tests, and quantitative measures of children's progress.

Regardless of the motivation, public policy matters are viewed, all too often, from the perspective of an adult, not a child. The call for better schools is often framed in terms of a desire to make America more competitive in foreign markets. Certainly, this is crucial, but it has little to do with the needs of children.

Many teachers surveyed share this concern: they contend that pressures within the classroom are too great and may result in children's "turning off" to learning. A kindergarten teacher with 18 years' experience in rural Pennsylvania voices her uneasiness:

> I am extremely concerned about the stress our children are exposed to. We don't seem to allow our children to be children any more. The push is for earlier learning—do it faster! It all starts in the elementary grades. The children are not able to learn in a relaxed atmosphere. We no longer have time to read a story every day, do creative dramatics, learn through experimentation, and review previous learning.

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A primary school music teacher in suburban New Jersey speaks for many colleagues when she criticizes the pressures caused by the growing reliance on test scores to measure students'—and teachers'—performance:

> In the large, affluent suburb where I teach, the pressure is on the kids and the teachers from kindergarten through high school to get good grades, bring up the test scores, and be the best (on the test). Classroom teachers are locked into curriculum, scheduling, and test preparation that leave little time for innovation, creativity, or diversity in teaching. Those teachers who would like to have the freedom to exercise their professional judgment are discouraged and frustrated. Of course, the competitive atmosphere affects students, too. Somewhere the meaning of education has been lost.

Teachers understand exactly what is lost when a "testing mentality" takes over. A 2nd grade teacher in suburban California describes her frustration:

> We must get them through workbook after workbook. We must make them produce on paper to be verified by all. We feel guilty doing an art lesson or having a wonderful discussion.

Because elementary school teachers know how vital excellent teaching is in the early years, they are baffled and disappointed that few others share this

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