THE IDEAL SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

by

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THE term "environment" conjures up for most a picture only of the physical phenomena about us. But there is a wider, broader definition which is more appropriate, and that is the "sum total of all influences" which act on the individual in a given context. Thus the home environment would be all the influences of home — parents (their mores, attitudes, views), siblings (their loves or jealousies, cooperation, etc), the socio-economic conditions of home, its location, and so on.

If the child becomes the reference point for the school environment, the influences bearing on him will include those of the following — the school (its tone and physical appearance), the classroom (its programmes, activities, climate), the teachers (their background, attitudes, abilities and goals) and the child's peers (their background, interests and attitudes). Even while we hold the child down as the constant focal point, it must be remembered that he is himself a variable quantity, bringing with him to the school influences and experiences acquired from home and community which interact with those of school to further enhance or modify his behaviours.

Because not all children come to school with the same experiences, it is unlikely that the interaction between out-of-school influences and in-school ones will produce the same results in all individuals. Hence the "ideal" school environment, in terms of the reality of things, is one where there is ample provision for the adjustment of the balance in the favour of each child, whatever the deficiencies in terms of learning experiences, attitudes or skills with which he enters school.

If such a definition is acceptable, then the school with the ideal environment will carry the following positive characteristics:

1. physical attractiveness and functionality;
2. healthy tone and climate reflected in its organisation and administration, its activities, and its concern for individual pupils;
3. confident and creative teachers who demonstrate stability in their relationships amongst themselves and with their pupils, sound teaching methods and positive attitudes.

Perhaps a closer look at these characteristics will help to clarify how they promote the welfare of the child.

1. Physical attractiveness and functionality

In so far as Singapore is concerned, many efforts have been made to improve the total physical environment generally. These are aptly
described by the slogan, “Towards a clean and green Singapore”. Schools in Singapore have not been slow in following suit. To-day all schools have made some attempt to provide a garden within the school grounds. Children are made to feel that they are personally responsible for the maintenance of such an environment. All this is to the good as these are affective aspects in a sort of deliberate and positive “manipulation” of the environment. Children, especially in their early years of life are suggestible. To be subject to positive influences when young will enable them to develop certain desirable attitudes and expectations with regard to what they see about them.

It has been suggested by research that a judicious use of colour can add to the effectiveness of space usage in school. “Activities in different areas within a classroom might be facilitated with different coloration depending on the instructional programme. Space in which more active instruction (and learning responses) are conducted could perhaps be more workable in light reds. Areas where more passive participation is desired may function better if coloured in dark blues or greens. These aspects of colour would seem equally relevant to recreation and therapy space”(1). Such studies as may establish the proper relationship between uses of colour and space have not yet been replicated in Singapore.

Evidence also highlights the importance of good visuals in the environment of early childhood instruction and development. Here again local classrooms in primary schools show an interesting splash of colour and provides stimulation through the use of charts and drawings, many of which are made by children themselves.

One development in the physical structure of schools in advanced technological societies may have negative long-range effects, namely, the resort to airconditioned, windowless classrooms. The investigators in studying this have suggested that visual contact with the outside world is very important to be affective homeostasis and, in turn, mental productivity.(2)

Other factors which affect learning have to do with the use of space and the positioning of furniture in a more purposeful relationship to the learning activity. Much of this is already acknowledged by the practice of local primary school teachers: in their classrooms, small library corners encourage individual reading, while specific clusters of tables encourage group cooperation and project work. Generally speaking, the use of space for group activity as distinct from that for individual activity is not very much. One trend to-day is to make the incorporation of a variation of instruction activity individually or in larger groups. This not only makes for optimal relations of planners and educators with the school.

However, to put the findings to test, that the findings of what the physical school environment and human features of the child may even turn out to be:

2. Healthy tone and climate

In a study of school environment, the simple dictum, “as the child is, so is the school” has taken on new significance. Attention to the fact that the physical environment is integral to the child’s well-being induces some reflection on the arrangements of the headships of schools. If a school are in such a way that whether such a tone is discernible in all school

The school serves as the main source of development of the child. To make this development effective, the physical environment must be conducive. The physical environment has a direct effect on the child’s growth and development. It affects the child’s physical, emotional, and intellectual development.

Thus, the school provides an environment that is conducive to the growth of the child. In emphasizing the idea that the environment in school is given over to the child, it is also moved ahead and growth in achievement, with positive outcomes, can be determined by earlier and by later school performance.

activity is not very much considered at local secondary schools. The trend to-day is to make the school itself more flexibly functional to permit a variation of instructional styles aimed at allowing pupils to work independently or in large or small groups as the occasion requires it. This not only makes for optimal space utilisation, but also compels school planners and educators to look jointly at the needs of those who use the school.

However, to put the picture in correct perspective it should be noted that the findings of what little research has been carried out on the physical school environment indicate that, when compared with the more human features of the school environment, the effects of the physical may even turn out to be quite fragile and inconsequential.

2. Healthy tone and climate

In a study of school bureaucratisation, Punch(3) concluded with the simple dictum, “as goes the principal, so goes the school”, drawing attention to the fact that the principal is the most important single variable in the organisation and administration of the school. This should induce some reflection on the criteria whereby persons are promoted to headships of schools. If the principal is a good leader he is able to rally his staff round him as a team. He sets the pace and tempo of work in such a way that whether the work be routine or innovative, a healthy tone is discernible in all the activities of his school.

The school serves many roles in society, but its main function is the nurture of the pupils entrusted to its care. In this respect, the activities which belong to a sound environment are those which help children grow into fully functioning persons in society. This simple statement carries important implications in terms of the development of the child physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. The rates in physical growth vary with different children and these are accompanied by variations in intellectual, emotional and social development. The different dimensions of growth are inextricably inter-related. Emotional development can affect mental growth because emotional factors block such mental activities as language and reasoning.

Thus, the school programme should show a proper balance in its concerns with the various areas of growth instead of limiting itself (as seems frequently the case) to only the development on the intellect. In emphasising the idea of a meritocracy, there is the danger that attention in school is given only to “a system of competition in which students are moved ahead and given further opportunities on the basis of their achievement, with position in later life increasingly and irreversibly determined by earlier school records...... Not only later educational opportunities but subsequent job opportunities become increasingly fixed by earlier school performance.”(4)


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Two negative effects are likely to arise from a lopsided view of the concept of meritocracy: first, it may be forgotten that the children who come to school represent not a mere select intellectual elite, but the whole spectrum of social class, bringing with them a wide heterogeneity of interests, attitudes and skills. Among them may be found, too, those who suffer an environmental disadvantage with respect to class and experience and who may be late bloomers. Others there are whose creative potential may remain unrecognised, untapped and ignored because of the undue obsession with the acquisition of information for examination purposes.

Secondly, the cramming of information produces imbalance also in the development of intellect. Not only will information obtained by cramming and rate-learning not be retained for very long, but modes of thought such as thinking, based on logical operations with ideas, and creative thinking styles may be cramped and stifled.

In a classroom where the climate is right, children engage in meaningful activities. They are allowed to respond to problem situations, to contribute their ideas, to seek information for themselves as much as possible and engage in manipulative and/or exploratory activities. It should not be expected that children can be taught everything, particularly in view of the knowledge explosion. They should therefore be given as much opportunity as possible to cultivate a taste for reading, to perfect techniques for information retrieval so that by the time they leave school they will have learnt how to learn. A library then becomes an essential part of the school's facilities.

Advocating a wider range of activities in the classroom — activities different from the normal passive acceptance of information given by the teacher — implies the need to devise new methods of evaluation. Children can be encouraged to self-evaluate; the diagnostic purpose of assessment should be more strongly endorsed to promote improvement in performance; peer-group evaluation can be encouraged to promote team work which relies on instruction by peers. Also, evaluation should not be considered a mere reporting technique whereby parents, who are being informed on their children's progress, are placed on the other side of the school fence where they perceive the report as an attempt of an antagonistic teacher to disparage their offspring. In the good school, parents can be made party with teachers and principal to help children over their growth and progress problems.

Concern for individual pupils in a school can be gauged by the attention given to proper counselling and the involvement of parents in the objectives of the school programme.

The school and its classrooms are places also where social skills can be learnt. Allowing children to work together, to share facilities and materials, to deliberate together and to teach one another will help them to develop socially.

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3. Confident and creative

It stands to reason that if the teacher produce imaginative and imaginative activity, and not in the class, it is common to see children who are bored. It is significant that such children, with "Understand?" an omnipresent and at times unconscious uncertainty of the teacher's approach. Questions are reduced to types. Where, then, is the logical principle that an individual's need, which need reduction. The individual, he sets a goal for himself, his desire for response, or his inspiration, he sets a goal for himself, his need for himself, his need. He finds himself, his need. He finds himself, his need.

Creative teachers understand that a variety of wants through the learning experience. In this respect, appreciate the unique and the individual in their pupils, their individuality. They do, in the long run, produce pupils who, at least, that they gain in confidence and develop relationships with their teachers.

School phobia, represented in the boy "creeping like a shadow," the sentiment of reluctance and the psychological problem of adjustment. Therapy for school phobia.

The reasons for school phobia are many. Discrepancy between home and school, peer group due to place value, teacher values, other such reasons beside bad teaching and a person's anxiety in school are all contributing to the insecurity.

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(5) For example read Kenny (1968) or Garvey W. P. & E. D. (1970)

3. Confident and creative teachers

It stands to reason that unimaginative teachers are hardly likely to produce imaginative and creative pupils. As one goes about visiting classrooms, it is common to see lessons in which the teacher takes the initiative for the beginning and ending of every episode in the lesson. Children are bored. It is significant that this kind of teaching is liberally interspersed with "Understand?" and "Isn’t it?" — questions indicative of the subconscious uncertainty of the teacher about the effectiveness of his own approach. Questions asked by such a teacher are largely "completion" types. Where, then, is the motivation for study? It is a well-known psychological principle that an organism learns only when it is sufficiently motivated. In other words, learning may be considered as contingent upon need reduction. The individual learner has certain wants, drives and desires which need to be satisfied. As the individual seeks satisfaction in his desire for response, or a new experience, or simple security, or recognition, he sets a goal for himself. The more worthwhile the goals he sets for himself, the better the learning which results.

Creative teachers try out different ways of generating an endless variety of wants through the learning materials the present and, later, through the learning effort itself. They are themselves learners and, in this respect, appreciate what their pupils are striving for. Their interest in their pupils, their interest in trying out new approaches to teaching do, in the long run, produce positive gains for their efforts to the extent that they gain in confidence at the task and reflect stability in their relationships with their pupils and their own colleagues.

School phobia, represented by Shakespeare in the famous lines about the boy "creeping like snail unwillingly to school", is no longer a simple sentiment of reluctance. To-day, it has grown to the proportion of a psychological problem which requires diagnosis and methods of treatment. Therapy for school phobia has been described elsewhere(5).

The reasons for school phobia are not necessarily school-based. Discrepancy between home and school values, removal from the familiar peer group due to placement at school, parental pressure to perform and other such reasons besides those associated with poor school programmes, bad teaching and a personal inability to cope with the day-to-day work in school are all contributory factors. Basic to all of these is a child’s insecurity.


The teacher, therefore, has a large role to play in the classroom teacher-pupil relationship. This does not imply that a teacher who is prepared to be understanding does so at the expense of proper expectations. What the child wants is someone who will help him face his problems and support his own efforts to cope with them.

There is a recent study by McGowan (6) in which it is reported that the counsellor adopted no more complicated method with his low-achieving counsellees than a ten-minute interview twice a week throughout the academic year. During each interview, the student is asked to describe his own progress since the last one. Academic performance and attendance at school significantly improved among the group.

Conclusion

Quality in education will improve when it becomes more generally appreciated that the relationships between the teacher and the child are very important in the learning process and need to be made meaningful in practice. It is therefore desirable for good teachers with positive attitudes to continue for a period of years in one school rather than that they should be transferred here and there to serve in different places for short periods of time. The fact that children in childhood tend to identify with adult figures suggests the need for children not to be exposed to a situation of instability where they face a frequent change of teachers.

The teacher-pupil relationships are what I have referred to earlier as the “human concerns” in the school environment. If these are sound, it is not likely that negative effects, due to somewhat less than the ideal physical environment, will have any significant impact on children’s achievement and progress.

THE SEMINAR which has been reported in the previous papers presented have been attended by the speakers in the seminar and the speakers in preparing their papers. The approach has, I think, just been mentioned.

It was the intention that the seminar should stimulate the intellectual life of the constituency. It was aimed at the understanding of various aspects of our own educational population as is to be underlined to bring it right to you. We would therefore see because if this was the case, eminent speakers but as we wouldn’t have

We thought that the idea of a kind conducted in the Poles is impossible, some of those available in our national knowledge and experience with mindlessness and public when we invited them to the seminar. We did not feel the speaking residents. So could follow talks in N

Has the seminar and frank when we and four weeks (three days) the point of attendance was Domestic responsibilities and comfortable homes have had to put up with as it were.

But anyone observing there was positive increased less directly concerned others like the ones of Psychology and Guidance and youths alike. We would have been a hint that have their own component