

Authority, Discipline, and the School Principal

*Boyd Reynolds**

Tradition is difficult to change, and the schools with a history of almost unchanged tradition are a daily evidence of this difficulty. A major part of the solid tradition of American schools is the role of the principal. The principal sets the atmosphere of the whole school in his relations to teachers, and they, in turn, set the atmosphere in each of their classes. In relationships with teachers, children, and parents, the principal today largely plays the traditional role of an authoritarian.

The teacher expects the principal to display authority which supports her in encounters with parents and with children, and the principal responds in the way in which he is perceived. Additionally, many principals relish wielding the authority with which many parent-teacher-child conflicts are settled.

The principal and the "Principal's Office" continue to be elements in the development of pupil behavior in today's schools. The threat of being sent to the "Principal's Office" is not much less foreboding in the 1960s than it was in the early 1900s. Children often enjoy relating that Johnny got sent to "The Office." And what happens in that office? If it should be Johnny's first offense, Johnny is reprimanded, humiliated, or threatened. Should Johnny be an occasional offender, he is reprimanded, humiliated, and punished in one of a variety of ways. The reprimand and humiliation are Johnny's lot, particularly should he be a chronic offender, and in addition, he is suspended from school for several days with the assumption that a dreadful punishment will be meted out at home.

So much for the misbehaving child. What about the "lazy" child and the traditional principal? The lazy child who has reasonable capabilities often has the title "lazy" softened by being classified as an underachiever. This child is frequently found sitting in or near the principal's office looking as if he is doing some kind of written work. His location near "The Office" is supposed to motivate him to accomplish in the classroom. Occasional stern looks or words by the principal intensify the motivation to a degree.

Another type of child who is sometimes tagged with the label of "lazy" is the child who is mentally deficient or retarded. In this case the principal advises and facilitates intelligence testing. Recommending future attitudes and vague instructional programs on the results of I.Q. tests are common practices of principals.

*Dr. Reynolds is a principal at Royal Oaks Elementary School for U.S. dependents in Madrid, Spain.

The telephone is one of the principal's primary instruments for warning the parents about the child's continued misbehavior. A telephone warning may take the form of a criticism of the child, after which the parent is given the opportunity to explain what is going to be done at home to correct the fault. The warning may, in more serious cases, become more of a threat to the parent when the dire consequences of such misbehavior are related. In almost every instance a demand for cooperation on the part the principal can be routed through the teacher by way of notes or letters. In these communications to parents a teacher recounts the shortcomings of the child and asks for parental cooperation in overcoming them, although such notes and letters are probably totally ineffective, because nobody tells the parents what they really could do. So why do teachers and principals send critical and warning notes to parents when they are reasonably certain that nothing will change? Dreikurs (1957) discovered, in discussions with teachers, that the hidden, underlying purpose of such "love letters" is revenge, to strike back at the child and to cause trouble for him at home for the trouble that he causes at school.

In the personal conferences which principals have with parents it is not unusual for the parents to get the feeling that they are being blamed for the child's misdeeds. The principal may be a good listener, but the parents become defensive after only a few words about their child. It is an understatement to say that the parents feel on the spot and that they *must* do something to effect an immediate change in the child's behavior.

In today's democratic and unauthoritative atmosphere, the principal must manifest a role different from that which is traditionally the case if the school's learning program is to be effective. To establish a constructive learning atmosphere the principal can no longer serve as referee, judge, and jury between parent, teacher, and child.

While it is true that the principal will continue to help teachers individually with each problem, the type of help will be different. The principal must not alone decide what is to be done to solve a problem. The teacher and the principal together must investigate the problem and agree upon the action to try first in seeking a solution. The principal can no longer blindly support the teacher in conflicts with parents and children. The needs of the situation and the welfare of the child should be the determining factors in reaching cooperative decisions.

It is in small group situations that the principal will find himself to be most effective with teachers. Through group discussion of common problems and topics of common interest the principal can integrate the faculty, build morale, and create an atmosphere of unity. Study groups should be encouraged and facilitated by the principal but not necessarily conducted by him. The teachers will find that they learn from one another, and a feeling of mutual interest and confidence can develop.

The subjects of discipline and authority will be of primary interest to the study groups just as they are to most groups, formal or informal, of teachers. Behavior problems will be discussed but fruitfully only after principles of solving behavior problems have been learned. The undergraduate education of teachers unfortunately does not include courses whereby a teacher learns to understand the behavior of children and how to prevent or cope with deviant behavior. As a result most teachers lean rather heavily upon their authority in trying to solve behavior problems and even learning problems. The study groups can enable teachers to learn how to teach self-discipline rather than to impose authority.

As a further diffusion of authority the principal must help teachers to learn how to conduct group discussions in their classes. Group discussion in the classroom is a necessary procedure in a democratic setting. Because all participate and can express their opinion and learn what others think, integration of the children is facilitated. In a free discussion each student develops a sense of significance and responsibility by being given the right to express his opinions and the obligation to listen to others. The responsibility for finding solutions to common problems is shared between the children and the teacher, and the teacher learns to rely on the class for finding solutions.

As the teachers learn through their study groups not to side with one child against another child or to try to judge who is right and who is wrong, the principal should set an example in the situations when the teacher confronts him with a disagreeing child. Not having witnessed the source of the disagreement, the principal cannot judge who is right and who is wrong. He should help the two find ways agreeable to each to settle the disagreement or conflict.

The principal in his relationships with children has to employ counseling techniques rather than authoritative techniques. Punishment and humiliation will not be used in the principal's office as punishment was part of an autocratic system in which the person of authority meted out punishment as he saw fit. In a democratic setting punishment is futile. The futility of trying to accomplish behavior changes by imposing punishment is recognized when we become aware that punishment for the same offense is being repeated again and again. Usually the greatest offenders in the school are the children who have been punished most often.

To be effective at changing behavior the principal should explain to the child the purpose of his behavior rather than to punish or to argue with him about his rationalized reason for the behavior. Once the child recognizes and understands the purpose of his behavior, the principal can show him alternative behaviors for feeling significant which are socially acceptable. Since a misbehaving child is a discouraged child, the principal has to offer encouragement at every opportunity and provide him with opportunities to perceive himself as a worthy, capable individual.

One of the best ways that a principal can make decentralized authority effective is to encourage and facilitate the establishment of student government. Many schools have student councils, but their activities are often restricted to learning parliamentary procedure in organizing a picnic or imposing penalties for violation of adult standards. A real student government will represent all pupils including those who are either indifferent or openly opposed to the educational process. The students who presently negate the educational goals of school and society have to be drawn in. Planning and decision-making cannot be left to the teacher or her student allies. The opinion of the council carries more weight than the opinion of the teacher. Through the student council the students can share in determining curriculum content, methods of teaching, school management, and the planning of the whole educational process. By giving children a respectable place in the school, the principal directs their determination to be independent and their claim to rights as equals into useful, constructive ways of expression. There is some discussion under way whether the student council should be replaced by student representatives who participate as full members of a government body which encompasses the representatives of administration, faculty, students, and maintenance personnel. Such arrangement is particularly needed on the college and university level.

In his relationships with parents, how can the principal diminish his authority and maintain his effectiveness as an educational leader? By taking a helpful attitude toward parents and by instituting child-behavior study groups composed of parents, he will find that his effectiveness will be thereby not only maintained but improved. In taking a helpful attitude the principal will explain the school's problems to parents rather than blame them for the problems. The principal's changed attitude will result in improved relations with parents, manifested in more open communication and less defensiveness on the part of parents. Exploration of the home situation and the interpersonal dynamics will be made possible. Psychological investigation into the sequences of children in the family, their personalities, and the parents' relationships with each child will often explain a child's attitude. Important clues can be obtained by observing the parents' behavior, especially the mother's. From the exploration and investigation the principal will gain an understanding of the parents' predicament and the problems which they also have. With such a background of information and a helpful attitude the principal can become a counselor of the parents rather than an admonisher. As a counselor the principal will explain the purposes of the child's behavior and help the parents to find alternative behaviors of their own which will necessitate the child's responding differently. Such a plan may first appear to tax the principal's time too much; but in the long run it will save him as much time as presently devoted to futile efforts to deal with the continuous offender.

The child-behavior study groups can be initiated by the principal and will be composed of parents who are interested in learning how to change

children's behavior from dysfunctional to functional. One of the major points of emphasis will be in clarifying the role of the father who in former days was accepted as the authoritative head of the household but who today finds himself to have little meaningful authority. Parents will learn how to function more effectively in a democratic family setting where authority will reside in the group rather than in an individual.

In today's democratic society the role of the principal as the complete and final authority of the school is no longer appropriate or effective. In his new role the principal will teach parents and teachers how to share authority with children. Not only by his own actions will the principal do such teaching, but also by establishing, conducting and developing programs of study for parents and for teachers in order that they may learn the philosophy and rationale of democratic living and the techniques of living and operating in a setting of self-discipline and shared authority.

References

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