

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

LIFE IN A NEW SCHOOL:
THE QUEST FOR MEANING.

by

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the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

The objective of the research was to study life in a new junior high school and to discern the influences which affected that life. During the nine month period of observation significant developments took place within the school and within the researcher himself.

The school moved through a number of stages that were recognized by other researchers in the beginning of new, very innovative schools.

The three general periods distinguished were:

- (1) Anticipatory stage,
- (2) Action stage,
- (3) Reflective stage.

A relationship was discovered between these stages and the cyclic motion of change proposed by Lewin:

- (1) Movement,
- (2) Unfreezing,
- (3) Re-freezing.

During the study the researcher abandoned the remote observer position to take a place within the action. From this vantage point he endeavoured to translate events into the meanings the actors themselves attached to them. The main difficulties encountered by the participant-observer in this quest were:

- (1) uncovering the anticipations, the constructs which the actors brought with them to the new situation,

- (2) identifying the exact problems which stimulated new meanings ,
- (3) distinguishing meaning which was hidden in the language people used.

An argument was outlined for a new school to be considered a special case of organizational change because it necessitated a culture building process. When people came to the new school they brought with them a vision and a culture developed in other organizations. Within the exciting community of the new school, the former culture was modified and a new shared culture resulted. During this adaptation process, historic decisions were made that affected the growth of the organization and some fatalistic feeling arose that threatened to arrest development.

In examining the part played by various change agents, the principal's role was considered important in determining structure. A group of creative and aggressive teachers, who had worked together previously, appeared to determine the new school culture.

Some recommendations were made to administrators involved in the new schools of the future. The practice of recruiting a sizeable number of teachers from one established school was questioned. It was proposed that new schools be entrusted to recruit additional staff because they were in the best position to assess the needs of the new community. Opening a new school at Easter rather than in September was suggested so that staff may take advantage of the long reflective period available during the long term vacation. The need for pre-

service training of teachers before the school opening was stressed as well as the need for continuing in-service education during the early years of establishment.

A theory, grounded in the experiences of this one school, was formulated about the acculturation process in new schools.

- (1) The vision which people hold about a new school presenting an opportunity for doing something different in education must be cognisant of the actual needs of the real situation.
- (2) The new school's exciting community stimulated the development of a new culture.
- (3) Decisions reached in the early days of the school conditioned the nature of that culture.
- (4) Provided pre-determined guidelines allow all participants to reach some understanding of events, excitement may continue to generate a growth in culture.

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Gerald O'Callaghan

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CHAPTER I

THE QUEST FOR MEANING

Futurologists have noted the ever-increasing pressure of technical and social change upon our present day culture (Toffler, 1974). Attention given to the problems of change today contrasts with the lack of interest of a yesterday when "change and innovation were frighteningly dangerous concepts" (Hillson and Hyman, 1971: 3). Some observers have noted that technical progress has resulted in the building of gigantic corporations and the blunting of individual awareness (Reich, 1970). Like the dinosaurs of the past, organizations tend to adapt slowly to change in their environment. Compared to their industrial and commercial counterparts, schools are described as the most tardy in accepting new attitudes and methods. They are relics, claims Katz (1971), of a bygone era, without sign of substantial change in the last one hundred years. Researchers have not been able to keep pace with the multiplication of the new creative forms of schooling which have been attempted. Unfortunately, the stories they tell are generally ones of failure and disillusionment (Levin and Simon, 1973). One might ask if there is something inherent in the structure of organizations in general and schools in particular which resists attempts to change. Individuals may become so enslaved by the requirements of the organization that they are oblivious to the excitement and creativity around them--prisoners of "mind forged manacles" (Gardner, 1974: 53). Until recently research into change in schools has emphasised large

scale research and development programmes like the new math or open space design (Bennis, Benne and Chin, 1966: 667). There is a growing interest today, however, in studying how change is introduced into specific educational organizations (Thomas, 1975; Sarason, 1971a). Very little research has been carried out into the life of new, but not necessarily unconventional organizations, like free or alternative schools. If Sarason's (1971a) prediction "the more things change, the more they remain the same" is true we might expect that schools will reproduce themselves: alike in organizational structure, in staff expectations, in educational programs, etc. With this prediction in mind, the story of a new junior high school is followed in this study. Using the findings of research which have been carried out in highly innovative schools some tentative conclusions have been drawn concerning stages of development of the organization and the outlook of the people who work within.

I. DEVELOPMENT OF RIEL JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Although a committee composed some educational specifications which were to be considered in the building design of an open space junior high school sometime before the principal was appointed, the educational life of the school really began with the appointment of the principal. Few restrictions seemed to be placed upon him beyond the injunction: "Go make a school." He began his duties a year before the school was opened: planning procedures, recruiting staff and, on occasion, discussing programmes with his newly appointed teachers.

Fundamental to all his ideas were: that he himself should be regarded as an educational leader rather than a business manager; that the staff should be involved in decision-making; and that teachers should work in inter-disciplinary teams.

Initially the principal had the sole power to recruit teachers. Within a short time, he shared the power with the staff. Some involvement of teachers in decisions regarding policy, finance and educational programming followed and led to the formation of standing committees.

After experiencing some building delays, the school opened in September, 1975 with 350 students and sixteen staff members. Once teachers became acquainted with each other and the specific tasks to be accomplished, attempts were made to team teach, but practical difficulties, like shortage of staff, intervened from the outset.

II. PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT

I carefully negotiated the snow piles in the unfinished car park of Riel Junior High School. I was a visiting Australian unused to snow hazards but familiar from first hand experience as a principal with the problems of new schools. I was interested in this place because it was new, because it provided me with the opportunity for studying the principal's role in establishing new schools and because the grade structure suggested a middle school, (Alexander et al, 1968, Gatewood, 1973), a concept entirely strange

and very exciting to me. In the next nine months the focus of my study expanded to include the whole life of the school.

III. FOCUS OF THE STUDY

The research endeavoured to focus upon people at work in this organization. In the "buzzing confusion" (March, 1972) of the school opening, uncertainty about roles was felt (Sarason, 1971a) as staff and students struggled to understand the new situation. By observing the interaction of people and by questioning and discussing issues with the actors, I tried to interpret the quality of life within the school and to discern the important stages of organizational development. My insights surfaced at very odd times: during moments of staff hilarity, periods of student restlessness or during outbursts of teacher anger or despair. Within what Benne calls "the crucible of understanding" (Bennis, 1966: 238) common beliefs, values and structures appeared to be shaping. Events, and the meaning people placed upon them, were creating the culture of the school.

The forging process was both uneven and protracted. After the school opening, the organization began to grow in size. The relationship between "pioneers" and new arrivals had an impact upon the character of the infant organization.

The story is primarily concerned with the people who make a school: principal, teachers and students. It is a personal account of my interaction with them and my own search for meaning in the

events that rushed by me. It is an attempt to reconstruct the social reality of the everyday life of the school. To paraphrase Berger and Luckman (1966: 23), "I knew that there was an ongoing correspondence between my meanings and their meanings in this world and that we shared a common sense about its reality."

Fromm (1969: 14) recognised culture as a process of man's reaching out towards man: that new communal activities create "something new in him." In line with this idea of growth my research methodology illustrated a dynamic rather than a static quality.

IV. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

My objective was to study the everyday life within a new school and to distinguish important influences that appear to affect the quality of that life.

To sharpen this general objective a number of specific questions were asked:

- (1) What problems could a participant-observer anticipate in his search to gain an understanding of the whole situation?
The question related to:
 - (a) determining the nature of the culture transferred from other places,
 - (b) identifying the events that trigger new meaning,
 - (c) seeking meaning in language.
- (2) In what ways is a new school an illustration of the change process?

(3) What or who is the change agent in a new school?

In particular the contribution of the following were examined:

- (a) the principal,
- (b) the departmental head,
- (c) the consultant,
- (d) the superintendent,
- (e) the staff or a group of teachers.

V. METHODOLOGY

Schutz (1967) described the phenomenological approach in sociology as "an attempt to elucidate the interpretations people put on their actions." By such an approach, I attempted to describe the problems people face in the new school situation as well as the meanings they appear to attach to these problems. During the process I recorded my own search for the meaning behind organizational development generally and the human activity involved in a similar way to Sheehy's (1976) search for the predictability in adult life.

Rather than applying accepted sociological models to empirical data I wrote the story of a school. At intervals I arrested the moving kaleidoscope of events as one would stop a movie to examine the characters in detail and the developing web of relationships (Berger and Luckman, 1966: 2). Smith and Keith (1971) used a similar technique, stopping the story occasionally and showing the action diagrammatically, while Sarason (1971a) used his Martian visitor to

wrestle meaning from what he secretly observed.

Because I commenced working at the school months after it opened, I reconstructed its pre-history from documentary evidence and from interviewing people who were involved in its very early days.

I gathered information by talking informally to principal, teachers, students and parents about developments in the school while they were at work and avoided the formally constructed interview session. Occasionally I devised formal questionnaires to clarify perceptions about particular roles within the school. The aim here was to allow the role incumbent an opportunity to clarify and reflect upon his own role perceptions. I used unofficial notes of staff members and minutes of meetings to supplement and revise my own impressions.

At the conclusion of the narrative, the principal commented upon my interpretation of the school scene, to allow the reader another perspective (Shipman: 1974b).

Assumptions. In conducting the research, I made some assumptions. Firstly that the constant presence of an observer over a period of time would induce the school population to confer upon me the homely status of belonging. Secondly I assumed that my status would not be confused by students with the staff, nor by the teachers with the administration. Because all groups of people seemed to talk with me openly and behave freely in front of me, there seemed to be some justification for making this assumption.

Related to the above, is the assumption that the observer will play a neutral role in the development of the school rather than that of promoter of change. I report humbly in Chapter III that whenever I stepped beyond the observer's role and proffered advice, the opposite appeared to eventuate. Sarason (1971b) and Corwin (1973) suggest that the observer, if anything, activates a negative rather than a positive response and my experience would seem to support this.

Limitations. My project covered the period of time from December 1974, when the school was planned, to November 1976, but my active observation only began in March, 1976. The early period was reconstructed from secondary sources (i.e. documents and interviews). The length of time I spent in the school was insufficient, particularly when the visitations stopped at what may have been a critical "take off" point (Etzioni, 1964: 38).

In an endeavour to balance a desire to be considered neutral with the need to be accepted, I replied to questions about the teacher's performance in a positive reinforcing fashion and tried not to comment disparagingly. Levin and Simon (1973) described the technique as "dampened feedback." While the technique limits the truth, it avoided confusing my observer's role with that of an evaluator's.

There is some evidence to suggest that pressures of work and time are factors which condition the formation of educational settings (Deal, 1975). The quality of my information was probably restricted by the same factors for I questioned teachers while they were "on the run" between periods, or stopped momentarily during lessons or when

they were resting, weary after the school day. Unavoidably, discussions were fragmentary, meanings confused and even perhaps misinformation collected.

Beyond all else, the severest limitations were in myself. The pace of school life is fast at any time, let alone in a new school. By attending to some incident or person at one time, I excluded others. As meanings were constrained by interests, experiences, needs and prejudices of the people around me so were they constrained in me.

An attempt was made, however, to strip away personal bias and interpret the meanings the actors themselves placed upon events. The more participants invited to comment on the observer's account, the more detailed and accurate the account is likely to become. However, space permitted only the principal to comment at the conclusion of the narrative in Chapter III.

Unfortunately, the budget for the investigation was limited. No teaching substitutes were available to enable teachers time to discuss problems and perceptions with me.

Because the study was limited to a single school, findings arising from it apply only to that school at the time of my investigation and cannot be applied "per se" to all new schools.

Delimitations. Some of the problems the new school encountered and some of the solutions applied were generated from outside the school: the Department of Education, local division, neighbouring schools. Time allowed only a superficial recognition of some of these outside influences.

VI. ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

Chapter II describes the dynamic and personal nature of my research. Problems of my acceptance into a self-conscious and fragile situation, my shifts in interest and experimental approaches are recounted here as well as my search of the literature relating to new schools, innovation and change. From this chapter occur a number of questions which provide a framework for the analysis of events which are told later in the "story of the school" in Chapter III. The principal of the school comments upon my interpretation of events at the end of this chapter.

The final chapter summarizes the study and draws conclusions relating to one school at the beginning of its history and the process of change within such a young, uncertain environment. From this experience some tentative recommendations are made to people concerned with establishing new schools in the future.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH AS A DYNAMIC PROCESS

Initially, I came to Riel Junior High School to study the establishment of a new school, the development of a middle school program, and the significance of the principal's role in the successful commencement of a school and the introduction of an extensive innovation.

Within a short space of time, I realized that Riel was not a middle school. I continued to work at Riel because I was intrigued by the growth and development in the quality of life within.

I. DEVELOPING A METHODOLOGY

After a preliminary study at Riel, I recognized the significance of the historical context for both the organization and the individual. The act of beginning prompted change. My own ideas changed, grew and developed from the time I arrived at Riel. At first it seemed that I could best study the change in people at the school by measuring in some way various perceptions of their role in the organization. By observing changes in their behaviour, and providing some kind of dampened feedback along the way (Levin and Simon, 1973) I planned to monitor the overall change in the organization. Various readings suggested that the principal was the central person in promoting change within the school. Milton Walker, the principal, welcomed the idea of a formal survey and we constructed together a lengthy questionnaire about his role. The questionnaire was distributed to the school staff

and to a sample of students and parents. A similar exercise for the librarian was carried out, but modifications were made that marked a significant stage in the development of a satisfactory research methodology. This time, the questionnaire was short and open-ended. A third questionnaire about the parents' role in the educative process was projected, but never eventuated. Meanwhile, the school staff were questioned incidentally on how they saw their role, their relationship with the community and the aspirations they had for the new school.

When analyzing the statistics drawn from the principal's survey with Milton one day, it seemed that the results were relatively unimportant to him and even less important to me than I had imagined at first. Later, I conceded that the staff, students and parents were disinterested in role studies. A realization was crystallizing slowly: the pulsating life of a school and the complex forces within could not be measured by a simple external instrument like a thermometer records a temperature. Such an instrument seemed apt to test some formal theory like "under the strain of opening a new school role perceptions are modified," but totally unsuited to a substantive area of sociological enquiry such as the study of the important influences which affect the quality of life in a new school (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 32). This kind of research was a dynamic rather than a static process. I searched for some research procedure to give "a wholistic view of the setting" (Dodge and Bogdan, 1974: 68). Participant observation was chosen because this procedure sought to interpret the meanings that

people in the situation placed upon events. The research evolved into a pensive, active, learning venture for me, personally. I endeavoured to formulate theory from the meanings people attached to events rather than test any pre-conceived hypothesis about the development of new organizations.

II. THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

If I were to reach some understanding about the life within a new school and to recognize some of the influences which affect the quality of that life, then three questions appeared to be critical:

- (1) What problems could a participant observer anticipate in his search to gain an understanding of the whole situation?
- (2) What is the nature of the change process in a new school?
- (3) What or who is the change agent in a new school?

The history of the school is told in some detail in Chapter III. Against the background of these questions, the story is analyzed in Chapter IV.

1. What problems could a participant-observer anticipate in his search to gain an understanding of the whole situation?

Because a phenomenological study depends upon the observer reducing his personal bias (Gergen, 1968: 214) in order to interpret the common-sense reality, the approach is often described as hazardous.

Selznick (1949: 250) points to the risk of factual error in using "personal interviews, gossip channels, working papers and participation" as methods. Lofland (1971: 99) sees the associate danger of the participant-observer being drawn into disputes that arise between cliques and factions or of being seduced to join the

enterprise. Related to this risk of seduction is the distortion of the common-sense interpretation by a feeling of ecstasy that often arises after an interesting experience (Phillipson, 1972: 140).

Although Milton accepted me as a colleague, I anticipated that my presence in the classroom might be questioned by teachers. Participant observation sometimes is aligned with an investigation of the observed (Ramsey, 1975) or downright spying (Lofland, 1971: 96). Distrust on the part of the observed is only part of the general problem of access. Both Lofland (1971: 131) and Phillipson (1972: 161) advocate that the difficulties of access be considered as data that the observer may use as resource material. Some tactic for easy access is nevertheless required. Alinsky, the political activist, defined a tactic as "doing what you can with what you've got." (Alinsky and Sanders, 1970: 76). In my case, the role of stranger who was curious about schools in Manitoba seemed an honest one to take, and it appeared to be accepted without question. That I spent time talking with the principal in his office was irrelevant to the staff, and students overlooked the fact that I talked to the teachers. In fact, confidences were entrusted to the point where I could be compromised by information leaks that may have occurred elsewhere. The dangers in the methodology were great, but as Phillipson (1972), Griffiths (1959) and Selznick (1949) conclude, the rewards were high. In this approach, I aimed to gather the common-sense knowledge which makes up the social reality of the school.

Following Stebbins (1975: 10 - 15), I anticipated that students