AN ANALYSIS OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL USING FILM AS A RESEARCH METHOD

by

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Abstract

Organizing an alternative school in an urban, working class community creates a special problem concerning the assumption of authority by the staff, especially if the staff is highly educated and from a middle class background. The process by which students come to recognize the lack of an authority structure in this particular school is central to the tensions of an alternative school and provides the basis for a thesis on urban alternative education. The most effective method of analysis to measure this interplay of forces and personalities is to combine action, voice and situation. This could only be done by filming the process of an alternative school dealing with its day to day problems. These series of confrontations and interactions are described in the following abstracts of the film itself. The film is a 16 mm black and white one hour documentary shot in cinema verité style, using sync sound. The school I have filmed for this study was The Group School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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This thesis is the result of research on the problems of organizing an alternative school within an urban community. It constitutes an innovation in presenting the findings and conclusions in the form of a 16 mm one hour film. The idea for this project originated at the MIT School of City Planning in cooperation with the MIT Film Section. My principal advisors on the substantive issues in the field of urban studies have been Professor Lisa Peattie, Professor Robert Fogelson, and Professor Robert Hollister. Principal advisors on the use of film as a means of expression have been Professor Richard Leacock and the staff of the MIT Film Section. The work began in June 1971 at the time the Group School was just starting to organize itself and continued to May 1972. Therefore I was able to follow each stage of the process of organization. It is the analysis of this process itself and the basic theme of assumption of authority which forms the substance of this thesis. I am indebted to the director of the Group School, Neil Didrickson and the staff and students of the Group School for their cooperation throughout the filming. The final product is entirely my conception and interpretation. It is not intended as a criticism of any individuals. I am indebted to Nancy Falk and Susan Woll for help with the taking of sound on location and for further technical assistance from Nancy Falk. In the subsequent abstracts of each chapter of the thesis I describe in summary form the sections of the film. This abstracted presentation of the filmed thesis has been approved by the
Department of City Planning and Urban Studies. The film can be obtained by consulting the Librarian at Rotch Library and viewed in E21 of MIT at the MIT Film Section. I want to acknowledge the financial assistance received from the Department of City Planning in the form of a full tuition grant.

This thesis brings out the problems of an alternative high school in an urban environment whose students are almost entirely white working class and whose teaching staff is all highly educated middle class young people. The salient theme throughout the film is the issue of authority. The process of decision making in a democratic system where students have the majority but where teachers have more inherent power given them by the students is identified by focusing on The Role of Teacher, The Issue of Attendance and Evaluation Policies. The outcome and climax of this situation is seen in The Conflicts Over Decision Making and The Definition of the Community. The film is divided into headings which constitute the various events that took place within the school which best illustrate the theme of authority.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The film begins with an explanation by four older boys to the director of The Group School about their disillusionment with the public school and the tracking system. They feel there is nothing relevant offered to them. They talk about wanting to start a school of their own and the problems facing them—certification, finding a building and giving out diplomas. The narrative goes on to other students talking about being working class and that the school they started would give working class kids a better opportunity than the public schools. They were looking for a new way of learning by experience rather than having knowledge crammed into them. Their school would be a place where they could change and the school would change with them. The school gets certified by the School Committee and some of the students' reactions to this are shown.
CHAPTER II

ROLE OF TEACHER

Two meetings are shown, the teachers' meeting of November 15, 1971 and the student meeting of November 20, 1971. The teachers are discussing their role as teacher, what it means to them to be a teacher and the particular problem of a policy on drinking. The attitudes about the drinking issue are fuzzy; the teachers talk around the basic issue without talking about what they think or feel. It is mostly talking about talking—a process of objectifying the problem rather than dealing with it. They do not talk about what they are going to do about taking the authority for setting down a policy on drinking nor do they discuss who should do this. The students are dealing with the same problem of a drinking policy for the school and the ramifications it has in terms of losing their certification as a school for violation of the law. The students are more clear about their concerns than the teachers. They want a decision from the teachers. They seem to want a school policy that states clearly that it is all right for them to drink. Without this positive policy, they imply that they will feel uncomfortable about drinking around the teachers of the school. This issue arises because the students and teachers are together in a social context often.
CHAPTER III
ATTENDANCE POLICY

Three meetings are shown; the teachers' meeting of November 8, 1971, the Academic Committee meeting of November 8, 1971 and an ad hoc meeting of April 15, 1972. The teachers are arguing about the need to call students after missing one class to check up on why they were not in class. Many teachers disagree with this policy. The director modifies the proposal so that only after several absences will a call be made to a student by the teacher. The Academic Committee meets the same day to discuss attendance and one student, Mike, tells the teachers that they should take a stronger stand if the students do not attend class.

Five months later Mike has dropped out of the Academic Committee because he could not cope with the position of authority he had to take over other students with attendance problems. An ad hoc meeting of people concerned about attendance includes Mike who points out that there are no authority figures in the school and asks whether there should be more or none. At this point the film portrays the emotional and psychological elements which effect the process of organization. The issue clarifies for the viewer one of the problems in the school which is that the volunteer teachers do not want to take any authoritarian position with regard to the students and leave it up to the staff to keep the school running smoothly in terms of disciplinary action. The Academic Committee gets down to the basic problem. The
teachers are not taking a hard enough line. The teachers respond by pointing out the complexity of the issue. Five months later the issue is still vital and has not been resolved. Neither staff, students nor volunteer teachers want to take responsibility for policing the students but the volunteer teachers are demanding that something be done about attendance. The issue of governance and how cumbersome and difficult it has become is clearly shown in this meeting.
CHAPTER IV
EVALUATION

Three meetings concerning evaluation and one class evaluation are shown. The important transition in the film from attendance to evaluation shows clearly the frustration surrounding the existence of committees as a policy-making instrument. Pressure from the parents for some evaluation of the students' work is the topic of the Evaluation Committee meeting (December 3, 1971). The teachers also discuss why they do not want to give out grades. Thus the community meeting (December 5, 1971) deals with the need to set up a mechanism for determining the measure of performance of the students' work. The teachers do not want traditional marking. The students do not want to be judged solely by their teachers but want a part in their own evaluation. The ad hoc meeting (January, 1972) discusses the possible reactions of the parents to the evaluation policy. This section shows the difficulties the teachers have in dealing with the parents. The actual class evaluation (December 9, 1971) centers around the student's observation that the teachers never show their anger and never blame the students for problems in the class. That the subject of anger arose in the actual class evaluation is appropriate because it relates strongly to the essence of the issue in the evaluation process and the school—the choice by the teachers not to take an overtly authoritarian position on many issues. Concurrently, the teachers explain their feeling that in a free school environment it is inappropriate for teachers to demand too much of the students.
CHAPTER V
CONFLICTS OVER DECISION-MAKING

This section is the climax of the underlying tensions that have been developing in the school over the issue of authority. Here we see the students and the teachers of the "Women in Society" class in a violent argument. The implication of authority by the teacher is there to be clearly seen but not admitted. Throughout the film the students have been demanding a clearer directive from the teachers. In this argument the teachers are not clearly saying what they want; there is a subtle authority in their tone which the students resent because it is not dealt with openly by the teachers. The following scene is an interview between one of the students and one of the teachers in the preceding argument. The student is withdrawing from the fight and the teacher responds to this withdrawl with bitterness. The implication of this section is that the teachers and students have finally begun to confront the issue of who takes authority but have by no means resolved the question. The problem which is suggested by this confrontation is the destructive use of authority when it is not formalized because the teachers are able to use their authority in ways which are emotionally damaging to the students and the teachers.
CHAPTER VI
DEFINITION OF THE COMMUNITY

The meeting shown is the community meeting of January 20, 1972. The school is undergoing changes which are put in terms of the group changing from a family to a community. There is the realization on the part of the students of the complexity of self-government, of building a school and the reality of the community and the structure that must be imposed to remain certified. The most poignant realization is that the school itself is growing up and the need for a family is being replaced by the expansion of the community. There is a sense that the school is progressing but that this growth is very painful to some of the students.