

Mark W. Novak. *Living and Learning in the Free School*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1975. Pp. 137. \$3.95 (paper)

This book is a sociological treatise on the emergence of a free school as an identifiable social unit. As such, the enquiry represents a field study, through time, of a group of parents, teachers, and youngsters embarked upon a collective experiment to forge a free school in keeping with a particular ideology of schooling. The author departs from the traditional methodology of sociological enquiry which concentrates upon the relationship between the educational institutions and society and focuses instead upon "educational practice, as a social phenomenon in its own right . . ." and the "ways in which society's members actually accomplish or make visible to sociologists (and one another) this, by now, taken for granted relationship between schooling and socialization" (p. 5).

The specific datum is the members' vocabulary and how this vocabulary becomes "sedimented" in a language that contains the rules for social life and "also, through members' speech and interaction, dialectically acts upon the world altering the world upon which members speak" (p. 7). More centrally, however, the author, as observer or participant member, attempts to reveal the hidden "interpretive, creative practices through which this (social) order takes its shape" (p. 7).

Only a brief résumé of the evolution of the school as a new social entity and the related sociological interpretations can be rendered here. Reacting against the alleged depersonalizing practices, manipulations, and even indoctrinations of the conventional school, a group of parents argued successfully, through a brief based upon the Hall-Dennis Report, *Living and Learning*, for the establishment of a free school. Professor Novak identified the essential impetus for this project as freedom from the mores and constraints of conventional schooling, not the impelling attraction of freedom for a clear ideal. Immediately, the group is beset by strains emanating from apparent chaos combined with incomprehensibility of on-going activities and the lack of directionality. A "curriculum," generated by a teacher, became the "genesis of social order" before the end of the first year, by which time one-half of the original sixty families had already left the school. The curriculum served two purposes: it organized the environment in order that preferred goals could gain some measure of visible attainment. More importantly, however, it provided "an objectification of the social world" and "stood as a living centre around which the free school arrayed its thought and language . . ." (p. 61). The teacher as "professional" became explicator, interpreter and sustainer of the moral code of the school.

Such enlarged clarity and concretization of the school's ideology, while leading to reduced chaos and parental discontent, resulted paradoxically, however, in a significant alteration in parental engagement in and concern for the free school. Parents, for instance, at their weekly meetings, exhibited a preference for "social talk" and "concrete" issues over "philosophical" talk, which, "by its very nature, attempts to uncover socially acceptable and taken-for-granted action, and therefore, it represents asocial talk, endemic to on-going community affairs" (p. 83). And the "core members," those who agonized over the struggle of articulation of ideology in the initial stage of the development, countered any move in this direction.

Philosophical goals, as held by teachers, continued to focus upon the awareness and sensitivity of children, while parents tended increasingly to argue for and expect demonstrations of more conventional forms of academic achievement. This split in ideological commitment within the school was attenuated temporarily by the appearance of an external threat to the continued autonomy of the school. The local board attempted to change the administrative structure of the free school but yielded by agreeing to an administrative separation of the school from its proximate public school counterpart. A new communion was attained as parents and teachers joined in a cohesive effort to counter this threat. Nevertheless, in the interest of maintaining sociable, limited and communal relations, they resisted the challenge of philosophic re-examination of the early ideology despite the efforts of a principal teacher to expose growing incongruities between shifting parental expectations and continuing school practices.

A visit by the author some two years later (Spring, 1974) revealed that the school had undergone further reconstruction: parents, particularly women, had sought new opportunities for personal development in work, political activity and in further training, changes that the author suggests emanate not just from "pedagogical preference alone, but, . . . from a 'realistic' conscious recognition of the social parameters that define this school today" (p. 126).

Throughout, the author applies a rich repertoire of sociological constructs from diverse and sundry sources to identify and illuminate the phenomena in emerging social organizations. The book is a well written and referenced chronicle of a research posture that "turn(s) conventional methodological procedure on its head; 'instead of allowing our methods to determine our stance toward every day life, we allow our stance to determine our methods'" (p. 23) There are times when the reader may strain to capacity as he attempts to negotiate the comparatively new terms imbibing new concepts as well as familiar terms carrying new and possibly unfamiliar meanings. This is no doubt due to the author's tight and condensed writing style. The reader who "stays with it", however, will be amply rewarded for his efforts in the expanded range of interpretations that the book affords and in the enlarged possibilities of systematic study of evolving and on-going phenomena in any definable collective.

Viewed, however, as an unfolding drama of human commitment and struggle to give shape to a new mode of schooling, one cannot help but see participants as actors who are being buffeted about by social forces or tendencies of which they are ostensibly unaware—a stark manifestation of social determinism. How might individuals in groups resist the tendencies toward "compartmentalization," "seriality" and the establishment of "pledge groups" in order to preserve the sustaining sense of community? How does a group combat "sociable talk," a preference for the "concrete" over the "philosophic," and a declining "commitment"? These are some of the anomalies that afflict any group pursuing common aims.

This work does much to excite the "sociological imagination." But can we expect that the next venture by some group to establish a "free school" will be any more informed, with its prospects for significant educational change and accomplishment any more enhanced? The author, particularly in view of his apparent support of the free school as an educational alternative (he was engaged for a period of time in the school as a practicing teacher), would not have compromised his integrity and responsibility as a research-scholar had he offered some insights, based upon his research and personal experience, into the ways and means of organizing collectivities among parents and teachers who are attracted to more autonomous and open school structures.

Pursuing this point further, it would have been intriguing to know whether the author, as participant as well as observer, alerted his cohorts—parents and teachers—to the emerging processes in which all were immersed and which, simultaneously, were the object of his study. Did he, for instance, offer interpretations of group tendencies deemed dysfunctional in attaining further clarification and realization of group goals? In general, researchers and practitioners both continue to presume that, through enlarged understanding, we can predict more accurately; and through more accurate prediction, we can exercise more effective control over the social environment in order that legitimate and worthy goals are more likely of attainment. Admittedly, however, such extension of concerns into the *realm of political and pedagogical practice* threatens to propel the sociologist into the intra- and inter-personal arena of human experience and action and thus, understandably, beyond the acknowledged boundaries of his field of enquiry.

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