

The very first issue of the **McGill Journal of Education** (Spring 1966) was concerned with "Activism." This was a popular topic, for the schools of Quebec were then beginning to try to adopt activist approaches to teaching as they sought to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Education in the Province of Quebec (the **Parent Report**). The following paper is a principal's description of the emergence of an activist school. — Ed.

The Activist Program at Mountrose School

E. George Cochrane

The revelation that the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal had selected Mountrose as one of its three "activist" pilot schools was received with mixed feelings by its principal and staff. While on the one hand we felt somewhat honoured to have been selected, we were uncertain as to what we were letting ourselves in for. Fears were expressed that the school would become an anarchist's dream with pupils running and screaming and leaping and fighting — all in the name of activism. Some teachers were worried lest they be subjected to minute direction. Others were certain that the school would be engulfed by tidal waves of curious and critical visitors.

None of these fears has materialized. It was understood by the PSBGM Curriculum Department and the staff of the school that the first year was to be a year of transition, a year in which we would move in the direction of implementing an activist program. But the manner in which we moved and the speed with which we moved were wisely left to the discretion of the professionals on the firing line.

And within the school, the policy was, and remains, that each teacher is free to develop her program in her own way. All that is demanded is that each be able to provide a plausible answer to the question: "What are you doing to justify your presence in an activist school?"

The first task that we, as a staff, undertook after learning that we were to become an activist pilot school was to define the term "activism." It was a term new to us, one that we had encountered only in the Parent Report. And so we turned to the Parent Report for guidance.

Via a translator's note we discovered that:

"Activist school" is a translation of the French "école active." "Activist" was chosen in preference to any more familiar adjective, since it implies with considerable accuracy the characteristics of the school envisaged for the province of Quebec by the Parent Commissioners. As a noun, the term is thus defined in **Dictionary of Education**

(New York, McGraw-Hill, 1959): "One who adheres to the belief that meaning arises out of the active experience of the individual..."
(Parent Report, III, 20)

Elsewhere in Volume III of the **Parent Report** we found this explanation of the term "activity methods":

In this school, where the teacher will no longer remain constantly at his desk but will participate in group research, work in the language laboratory, make physics and chemistry a living experience rather than a bookish theory, the general atmosphere and the relations between teacher and pupil will be radically changed. In a school which takes on the task of accustoming pupils to learn, to understand and to work, the teacher himself will more often be seen seeking the solution of a problem which has been set before him than in the process of transmitting an indigestible mass of bookish information. The textbook will be a reference work, like the dictionary or the grammar, while experiment and personal research will be the equally frequent and normal sources of knowledge. There will be as many classroom periods for questioning and research as there are for conveying knowledge. Teachers and parents as well must come to understand and accept these new methods, which are more profitable for the child. And in this way, the teacher will, for his own part, be a kind of pupil; he will learn many things from those in his charge — first of all, to know them better and then to see and respect more fully their serious intent, their good will, their initiative, their intelligence and their independence — the latter a stage along the road to the personal autonomy they require and one of the many forms of their dignity as individuals. **(Parent Report, III, 12)**

We also found this description of the mentally active school:

It is not enough for all the pupils in a classroom to be occupied in order to achieve the true goal of the activist school; they must, simultaneously, be active mentally, that is to say, occupied in learning something by their own efforts. The activity involved is an intellectual activity of inquiry and discovery. Many counterfeits of the activist school could easily give the illusion of being the real thing, while leading to deteriorated forms of teaching, and to intellectual glibness, instead of accustoming the child to a questioning attitude with regard to knowledge. **(Parent Report, III, 20)**

After examining these pertinent portions of the **Parent Report**, we concluded that the essence of activism is the involvement of the child, to the greatest extent possible, in the learning process. We concluded also that there is absolutely nothing new or different in this concept, that it is merely an echo of John Dewey's "Learn by doing" dictum, and were aware that good

teachers have always succeeded in actively involving the pupil in the learning process.

It was at this stage in our thinking that we were able to agree on a number of guiding principles. These were as follows:

1. Each teacher has the freedom and the responsibility to develop an activist program in her own way, one that appears suitable for her own particular group of children and one with which she will feel at ease. (Those teachers who did not wish to serve as members of the staff of an activist school were given the option of transferring to another school.)

2. Activist methods are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Care must be taken to evaluate pupil progress in terms of accepted goals.

3. Correlation between subjects is part and parcel of an activist program; the timetable in an activist school should, therefore, be highly flexible.

4. The atmosphere within the school as a whole and within each classroom should be such as to foster the activist approach. This principle obviously has implications for classroom discipline and management.

In preparation for the formal launching of the activist program in September 1968, a number of staff meetings and seminars was held. At these gatherings, the principles enumerated above were arrived at, the application of activist principles to specific subject areas was discussed, and, in general, the manner in which we, as a staff, were to handle our responsibilities as teachers in a pilot school was clarified. We had the benefit at certain of these meetings of some of the subject consultants from the PSBGM.

As our discussions continued, and as teachers began to introduce a more activist approach into their teaching, there were two basic principles to which we became increasingly committed.

The first was that of **continuous progress**, the belief that, in the basic subject areas of reading, mathematics and language at least, the teacher's role is initially to diagnose a child's strengths and weaknesses, to proceed from the point at which she finds each child, and to carry each child as far as she reasonably can. We also agreed that the progress of brighter children should be enriched horizontally as much as possible, rather than merely vertically.

The second principle that we accepted was that of the **integrated curriculum**, of the fusing together of subjects.

What has happened in the various subject areas as a result of our becoming an activist school? There are differences from grade to grade and between classes within a grade, but the following generalizations present a reasonably accurate over-all picture of what has been happening.

Reading: More effective grouping for instruction is taking place, there is greater correlation of the reading program with other subjects, particularly in the senior grades, and increasingly teachers are moving in the direction of individualized reading programs, particularly for brighter youngsters.

Spelling: Less reliance is being placed on the text and a greater effort

is being made to adapt the spelling program to individual differences.

Language: Emphasis is being placed on the development of effective expression. Correlation of language with other subjects is much more common.

Creative dramatics has been introduced into the school but is still in the embryonic stage.

Literature: A tremendous increase in the amount of extra reading done by the pupils has been noted.

Handwriting: There is less emphasis on formal instruction, particularly in the intermediate and senior grades.

French: The changes in this subject are the same as those to be found elsewhere in the PSBGM system.

Mathematics: Increasing use of the discovery method. Pupils are working in groups much more commonly than was hitherto the case.

Science: The science program has been, in large measure, divorced from the textbook. More and more, the pupils are engaging in their own experiments and in their own research. They are being encouraged to discover and to think for themselves.

Geography: Less emphasis on facts. More use of maps, particularly topographic and aerial photograph, maps and much more project and group work.

History: As in geography, there is much less stress being placed on the memorization of facts. Instead the pupils are being asked to solve problems, to engage in research and to work in groups. Group findings are often shared by means of informal dramatizations.

Music: The hope is that music will increasingly be correlated with other subjects.

Library: The school library is being used more than ever before.

The foregoing will perhaps suggest the truth of this paragraph from the **Parent Report:**

Activist methods assume that the teacher has developed a strict professional conscience. Classroom preparation is much more complicated for this type of education than it is for the traditional kind. The teacher must foresee the needs of each work group and even each individual. He must give thought to possible difficulties and anticipate them. He must be ever alert and ready to assist those in need of his help, making sure that everyone in the classroom is intellectually active. Furthermore, as is true of traditional teaching, one of the best methods remains the example given by the teacher; corrections made with care and furthering the pupil's personal progress sometimes exert upon him a more lasting influence than collective teaching or group work. A conscientious, precise, attentive teacher, through the sheer power of example, often produces conscientious, precise and attentive pupils. The primary moral

lesson which must be conveyed by the school is that of work well done, of intellectual awareness, love for truth, perseverance and courage. (Parent Report, III, 21)

What are my general impressions after more than a year as the principal of a partially "activated" school? I can summarize them as follows:

Probably the most beneficial outcome of our selection as a pilot school is the impetus it has given to everyone on the staff to examine critically his own teaching techniques. From this critical assessment, and from a willingness to experiment cautiously with new ideas, has emerged a better over-all program, one that makes better provision for individual differences, that better recognizes certain of the facts about child development, and that stimulates imagination and curiosity.

The things that are happening in our school are, for the most part, things that are happening or could happen in other elementary schools. The label "activist" is not, in itself, important.

What is important is that teachers develop a professional and critical attitude towards their own work, that they recognize and accept the differences that exist in children, and that they strive consciously to develop in their classrooms an atmosphere conducive to the pursuit of knowledge, the growth of understanding and the development of social skills.

These are the things that have been happening in Mountrose School.



The McGill Centre for Learning and Development

Gary J. Anderson

With the establishment of a Centre for Learning and Development, McGill recently launched a major drive to encourage reform and innovation in learning and teaching methods at the university level. The Centre is directed by Marcel Goldschmid of the Department of Psychology, and has a permanent staff of three other professors as well as three research assistants. An advisory board, made up of well-known scholars from Canada and the United States, will oversee its work.