
Foreword

Few issues in our society are more vital than creating good schools. And few are more elusive and intractable. Indeed, the history of American education is littered with remnants of disappointing efforts to improve schools.

Limited success in making schools hospitable to human learning is not for lack of effort. Indeed, hosts of change agents heroically try to make a difference from their distinctive positions. For instance, it is believed that schools can be improved by:

- Improving teacher preparation and selection
- Providing preservice and inservice leadership development
- Improving the curriculum
- Involving parents
- Central office mandates
- Deployment of funds by private foundations
- State and federal legislation
- Rigorous and frequent standardized testing

Yet all too often, the impact of these efforts is marginalized because each sees and latches onto only the trunk, leg, or tail of the elephant.

Enter the “comprehensive school reform” movement. The rationale is straightforward and compelling: Schools will change only through coherent, systemic, and systematic efforts in which the entire school focuses upon a particular educational philosophy and a particular methodology. Things happen only when the entire elephant is comprehended and grasped!

The *MicroSociety*[®] program is one of many whole-school reform efforts proliferating throughout the country over the past decade or so. The pages you are about to encounter are about “Micro,” its derivation, its underlying

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set of beliefs and practices, and its robust place in the life of more than 200 elementary and middle schools in America.

Yet the volume is much more. In many ways, it is about ALL attempts to improve schools. Micro may be but one idiosyncratic school reform effort. However, I find the conditions for change explicated here and the process of implementing and sustaining change to be generic.

Hence what you are about to encounter in the pages that follow can be approached along two parallel tracks: the learnings from the *MicroSociety* experience, on one hand, and what we can learn about the exquisitely treacherous and difficult work of improving a school, on the other.

Among the issues considered here—all too familiar to those of us who have or will ever attempt to improve a school—are:

- Gaining teacher buy-in and commitment
- Getting teachers and principals to relinquish “control”
- Reconciling philosophical and pedagogical differences
- Dealing with additional “add-ons” of time and effort
- Curriculum development and articulation
- Problem students who will not comply
- Parental involvement
- Leadership
- Generating adequate resources
- Sustaining change over time

George Richmond, the founder of *MicroSociety*, was my close friend for 40 years. Throughout my career, I have also been a close friend of imaginative, experiential education, of which Micro is an example. I serve on the Board of *MicroSociety*, Inc. And I have been an enthusiastic member of the cheering section for this book in its various stages of development. So let me be frank to point out that I am heavily biased in favor of the innovator, the innovation, and the scribe.

Fortunately, Cary Cherniss, who writes with welcome clarity and insight, is far more objective, independent, rigorous, and scholarly in his treatment of *MicroSociety*—although he too, in the end, becomes converted by the power of this compelling idea for improving schools.

Over the years, I have visited several *MicroSociety* Schools. I like what I see. It feels right. It ‘s “working.” Easy to see and to say, but oh so difficult to capture in words. Let me try to articulate why I feel *MicroSociety* offers such a promising road to fundamental school reform. There are several reasons:

1. We often read in curriculum guides some version of this sentence: "The purpose of education is to prepare students to prepare for and live successfully within our democratic society." A noble goal indeed. Yet why is it that the governance of most schools and classrooms resembles far more a South American dictatorship than a New England town meeting? I fear that our schools are succeeding in teaching that democracy is a fraud.

Students will come to fill their places in a democratic society not by taking civics classes, but by being immersed in a working democracy. *MicroSociety* provides just such a setting. In the Micro schools I have visited, it is clear that students know what a vibrant democracy is all about. They know what a democracy can do for them and what they can do for a democracy. And they come to demand it outside of school as well as in.

2. Most of what goes on in schools is problem solving, those posed by teachers to students. Youngsters solve algebra problems. They find the causes of the War of 1812. They answer the questions the teacher poses for a reading assignment. To be sure, there are plenty of times that addressing the teachers' problems is important, even essential, for a student's well-being.

Yet the learning potential in students responding to teachers' problems is limited. It is the problems that we humans pose for ourselves, care deeply about, and in which we are motivated to engage and find meaning that harbor the greatest learning . . . in the short run while in school, and in the longer run beyond school. Consequently, I believe learning in schools will become energized and likely to spread to out of school time only when youngsters have as many opportunities to pose and address their own problems as teachers pose for them.

No one sums it up better than George Bernard Shaw: "What we want to see is the child in pursuit of knowledge, not knowledge in pursuit of the child."

I see in *MicroSociety* an elegant, comprehensive structure that enables teachers and students to achieve a balance of the problems posed by each. Here students (and teachers!) learn how to pose and sharpen problems and questions and invest themselves in marshalling resources to address and resolve them. Here, we see the child in pursuit of knowledge.

3. The predominant sound within the schoolhouse is the voice of the teacher. It has been estimated that about 85% of what goes on in schools is teacher-directed, didactic instruction. This is a transmission

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of information from the teacher (who presumably has it) to the student (who presumably does not). 15% is something else.

Unfortunately, ample research suggests that a person retains a few weeks later perhaps 5% of what he or she is told. A weak treatment. This, despite the fact that current brain research suggests the length of time a teacher talks to students should not exceed in minutes the age of the student in years. So, for instance: didactic instruction no longer than 10 minutes for fourth graders who are 10 years old.

If I could do one thing to reform schools in this country it would be to shift the ratio to 15% didactic instruction, 85% something else.

"But what do I do for 85% of the time if I don't 'instruct' the students?" a teacher asks. It is when we ask, "How can I promote profound levels of human learning besides talking?" that I believe we really become educators.

MicroSociety finds a way to reduce the formal teacher instruction way below 85% and introduces a yeasty repertoire of "something else." How? By creating within the schoolhouse a miniature but genuine community of businesses, banks, courts, and law enforcement systems in which students play real and essential roles. To play those roles, they must, of course, learn. They learn about taxes, banking, law enforcement, the judiciary, about politics and an economic system. And in so doing, as both Cherniss and research suggest (even though Micro does not teach to the test), their literacy skills rise, their test scores rise, their attendance rises, and parent and teacher satisfaction rises.

4. I believe schools will succeed in promoting learning when students find on a regular basis in their school experiences both pleasure and success. Not all the time, of course. Not all learning is pleasant. Much learning comes from difficulty, even failure. But students must experience pleasure and success often enough so that they will feel absorbed, committed, and satisfied in their learning. Unfortunately, this is not the case for many students in many schools.

How to ensure that each day each student will experience times of pleasure and success in learning, then, is a crucial challenge for the educator. Those immersed in *MicroSociety* are finding success in meeting this challenge.

So in Micro, one finds nothing less than a democratic vehicle for empowering students in their own education, a framework that enables teachers to be facilitators of students' learning as well as transmitters of knowledge, a continuing source of satisfaction, accomplishment, and joy

for students . . . and a holistic conception that enables the principal to hold it all together. That's a lot!

It's been said, "The only person who welcomes change is a wet baby." Cherniss forthrightly points out a sobering side to the *MicroSociety* story: The work of changing schools is not for the faint of heart. Impediments abound from within the school and from without. For all of the benefits *Micro* offers, it's not easy going. Indeed, as one case study of a school's failed attempt to adopt *MicroSociety* attests all too well, for this (or any) innovation to take root, a daunting array of conditions must be in place.

As much as he admires the *MicroSociety* model, Cary Cherniss warns us that a good model is not enough. Change agents need effective strategies for implementing and *sustaining* that model.

In this thoughtful "users' manual," school reformers, teachers, principals, central office officials, and scholars will find an approachable and immensely helpful guide full of strategies for walking that treacherous path toward school improvement.

I wish I had had this volume during my years as a principal!