

The John Dewey Academy: A Residential College Preparatory Therapeutic High School. A Dialogue With Tom Bratter

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The John Dewey Academy is described and discussed by Thomas Bratter, president. The school views its mission to provide intensive educational and therapeutic assistance to self-destructive adolescents who are psychologically intact and have superior potential. Similar to other secondary schools, The John Dewey Academy wants to be judged by the reputations of those colleges that accept its graduates.

Before I finished my psychiatric training at UCLA in 1956, I was a consultant to the Ventura School for (Adolescent) Girls, a correctional facility run by the California Youth Authority. During the decade I was there, I completed *Reality Therapy* (Glasser, 1965) and worked on *Schools Without Failure* (Glasser, 1969). What I discovered then and know now is that schools must address the psychosocial needs of students instead of trying to define educational and occupational roles (Glasser, 1972). To exacerbate this deficiency, schools are inadequately managed so students are not motivated to produce quality work. I recognize this is not a startling revelation because many others have stressed the need for educational reform. Using control theory ideas (Glasser, 1984, 1986) and my recently completed book (Glasser, 1990), I like to believe I offer some salutary solutions for educators to consider.

I believe The John Dewey Academy exemplifies a quality school. Wanting to learn more about it, I invited myself for a 2-day visit in April 1989. I found a shared sense of mission between the students and faculty. Students appear grateful for a final chance to succeed and work diligently. They demand the best from themselves and of their peers.

The goal of this unique, essentially educational, program is to produce students of character who have courage of their convictions and the moral vision and integrity to become leaders of tomorrow. In less than 5 years, The John Dewey Academy has been accredited by The National Independent Private Schools Association and is a candidate for accreditation by The New England Association of Schools and Colleges. Graduates have been accepted by Babson, Bowdoin, Columbia, LeMoyne, Sarah Lawrence, the Universities of Arizona, Hartford, and Massachusetts, Wellesley, and Williams College.

I have known Tom Bratter for more than 25 years and have followed his career with interest. Bratter directed and created six community-based drug and alcohol treatment programs for adolescents and their families in Westchester County, New

York (Bratter, 1973, 1985, 1990). He maintained an independent practice of psychotherapy in Scarsdale for 15 years (Bratter 1972, 1974a, 1989).

A prolific writer, Bratter loves to debate clinical issues and often delights in galvanizing his audience by using incendiary rhetoric and provocative clinical cases. Some may be polarized by his directness but respect his passion. Never have I encountered anyone else who feels comfortable speaking both in polysyllables and expletives. In his way, Bratter may be as unique to psychotherapy as Jaime Escalante is to education (Mathews, 1989). Both get results by being unrelenting and maintaining extraordinarily high expectations for productive behavior.

THE INTERVIEW

Why did you start The John Dewey Academy?

I was frustrated because traditional residential treatment programs for alienated adolescents, who refuse to play by anyone's rules but theirs, have been ineffective and often created more problems than they purported to solve. Many adolescents who continue to test limits and defy authority suffer more from long-term effects of incarceration than had they not been treated. I believe some inpatient institutions deprive adolescents of their dignity, passion, spontaneity, and creativity.

Often when adolescents become angry and disruptive they are medicated. Medication becomes the magical elixir that will restore adolescent patients to "normalcy," a condition against which they rebel. Prozac is the miracle drug of the 1990s. Medication preserves the care, custody, control, and conformity repressive-oppressive milieu of inpatient treatment programs (Bratter, 1983).

I wanted to convince mental health professionals that when adolescents who engaged in self-destructive behavior were placed in an uncompromising environment with high expectations which demands moral integrity and educational excellence, these individuals can transcend their previous self-destructive performances (Bratter, Bratter, & Radda, 1989).

We welcome angry students. We prohibit mood-altering medication since we are an educational program. Our students do not need 24-hour-a-day supervision. Some students had been institutionalized at Four Winds Hospital, the Menninger

Foundation, New York Hospital, and Yale Psychiatric Institute so we are unafraid to admit troubled and troublesome students who are "at risk" and require residential care. Crucial to our admissions process is the student's current attitude rather than standardized test scores and past academic performance. We want to know whether candidates for admission wish to change dysfunctional and unproductive behavior. Unless these applicants can convince us they want to work diligently to achieve academic excellence, they will not be admitted. Each candidate is required to spend a week at the school before admission is determined.

Since The John Dewey Academy is a residential, drug-free college preparatory therapeutic high school, there are no third-party payments. The tuition for 52 weeks is \$35,000. There are opportunities for scholarships. There are currently 20 students. Capacity probably will be 40. There are four full-time and three part-time faculty. Three have their doctorates and one is ABD. The others have their master's degrees. The average age is 40.

I recognize your rage directed against the psychiatric establishment. How did you convert your revolutionary zeal into corrective action?

I never found the "ideal" residential program which would provide the structure and support and the educational and therapeutic environment which would help adolescents apply their superior intellectual abilities. I modified Dewey's educational philosophy and some psychotherapeutic principles I used with drug-dependent adolescents (Bratter, 1989).

Bandura (1967) has articulated my beliefs when he wrote:

The day may not be far off when psychological disorders will be treated not in hospital or mental hygiene clinics but in comprehensive "learning centers," when clients will be considered not patients suffering from hidden psychic pathologies but responsible people who participate actively in developing their . . . potentialities. (p. 86)

Given your views about the toxicity of traditional treatment programs for adolescents, could you explain what is done differently?

Unlike residential programs where the credentialed staff retains control, The John Dewey Academy stresses the concept of individual empowerment. The management of the school is the responsibility of senior students who order and prepare the food, who maintain the premises and property, who possess the power to vote or veto prospective candidates and teachers. Productivity is rewarded by status and privileges. After academics and jobs are completed to the satisfaction of seniors, who remain accountable to the staff, students can go to town when they agree to behave responsibly.

Seniors assign jobs, supervise, and evaluate performances of subordinates. In so doing, seniors internalize Judeo-Christian values by recognizing personal payoffs of earned achievement. Seniors recognize the pressures, obligations, and rewards of upward mobility. Seniors become more confident, assertive, and self-reliant, which decreases their dependence on peer approval. By assuming managerial roles, they develop leadership skills. The John Dewey Academy's mandate has twin goals. The first goal is to help students gain character, moral integrity, human decency, and self-respect, which are more important than hedonistic activities. The second goal is to provide intensive, individualized instruction that demands academic excellence (Bratter, Bratter, & Radda, 1986). In addition to gaining written and verbal communication skills, students learn how to think critically, creatively, and constructively,

which I believe is more important than performing well on standardized tests such as the SATs. Effective education assists learners to define a proactive synergistic relationship between themselves and society.

I agree. There is more to learning than memorization. The teacher cannot force students to learn. Students will learn only when learning provides answers to questions such as "Who am I?" "How do I justify my existence to myself?" "Where am I going?" "How am I going to get there?" "What do I believe?" and "How should I live?" How does The John Dewey Academy individualize education?

While there is a core curriculum that teaches standard skills and disseminates traditional data, whenever possible each student designs individual learning projects subject to the teacher's approval. The academic philosophy can be summarized by understanding the differences between intellect and intelligence. *Intellect* is the mastery of verbal and symbolic behavior that enables students to think hypothetically and communicate those thoughts. Thinking skills such as reasoning and problem solving are emphasized. *Intelligence*, in contrast, is more pragmatic and comprehensive. The John Dewey Academy adds a moral education component that includes the seven "Rs"—that is, responsibility, reality, respect, responsiveness, renewal, relevance, and reverence. The pedagogical relationship needs to create the conditions that nurture the formation of a positive personal identity.

I think many people do not recognize how difficult it is to be an effective teacher. Educators are caught in a "Catch 22" trap (Heller, 1961). When teachers challenge students to think by defending their ideas and beliefs, they have a chance to learn but may not do well on standardized tests. If, however, educators teach from the mandated curriculum, students may not learn much they consider to be of value but probably will perform better on standardized tests. Either way instructor and students lose. How do teachers teach this curriculum?

The John Dewey Academy modifies the traditional role of the teacher, who formerly has been the purveyor of wisdom, of truth, of reality. The teacher was omnipotent and the custodian of the past. Students were expected to accept as dogma everything the teacher taught without questioning. At The John Dewey Academy the teacher becomes a partner, a guide who motivates and inspires students to become active learners. The Socratic method of teaching is used. The teacher becomes a responsible role model who develops meaningful relationships predicated upon reciprocity, sharing, and caring.

I would like to discuss hiring procedures since they add another dimension to empowerment. The staff retains the right to reject any teacher applicant. Once the staff believes the applicant has impressive academic credentials, teaching competence, moral integrity, and charisma, the person is invited to teach on a trial basis and to interact with students by answering reasonable personal questions. The students, who are the consumers, vote whether they wish to study with the teacher. A majority vote determines whether employment is granted. These checks and balances are unique to The John Dewey Academy.

This is idealistic and interesting. What has The John Dewey Academy learned that applies to public education?

That the war which is waged in the classroom can be won! That the classroom teacher can make the crucial difference. That the persona of the teacher and commitment to excellence is as

important as technical skills. Look at Escalante, who teaches in the Barrio of East Los Angeles. He motivates his students, whose performances on the Calculus Advanced Placement Examination of the College Entrance Examination Boards surpass all but 10 schools in the county. By sheer determination, this gifted teacher inspires students to attain a level of greatness that exceeds all optimistic expectations.

Praise is a potent motivator. Rather than lecturing from a predetermined curriculum, the teacher becomes the consultant-catalyst who stimulates students to want to learn by relating to them as persons rather than automatons. Students are inspired to wonder, to question, to investigate, and to learn. Is there anything else?

When the teacher passionately is committed to continued active learning, students will want to confront and shatter the restricting personal boundaries of ignorance and of insecurity, to gain knowledge and independence. Most teachers have low expectations so students do not produce quality work.

I agree. At times the teacher can return work to be redone when it does not represent the student's best effort with the admonishment, "I know you can do much better!"

The John Dewey Academy extends the role of the teacher to include mentoring (Bratter, Cameron, & Radda, 1989). This is responsive to your plea for the helper to become personally involved and invested with those being helped to help themselves. Wolfe (1935) poetically describes the fundamental quest in life as:

To find a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united. (p. 39)

Children and adolescents gain their unique identities when they interact with adults and their peers. The teacher needs to understand this crucial dynamic, which has implications for pedagogy. The teacher needs to have the strength to endure the stress of dependence by adolescents who wish to glorify the person from whom they can individuate and separate. The teacher needs not only to confront the anger and betrayal adolescents feel but also to channel this energy into positive activities.

I agree. Teaching which ignores the affective needs of students will be ineffective. Can you describe the psychosocial similarities of the students who attend The John Dewey Academy?

Students have imprisoned themselves in a no win—no exit labyrinth where failure begets failure. Students arrive disoriented and demoralized because their only success may have been to convince everyone (including themselves) they were failures, losers, and rejects. Students enter confused and conflicted because they fought the wrong battles. Consequently, their perceptions are convoluted because, when they thought they won, in actuality they lost. These youths have acted out against an environment which they judged to be insensitive, hypocritical, and inimical to their needs to find meaning and to belong. These adolescents have called a temporary truce in the war they are waging but trust no one. They need to be convinced about the wrongness of their ways before they will contemplate change.

They view themselves as less competent, less in control, and less capable of success than others. They consider themselves to be victims. They feel helpless and hopeless. What these students need to learn is they have been the perpetrators who engaged in self-destructive behavior which they can change when they wish to take control and accept personal responsibility rather than blaming others and/or societal conditions. These adolescents need to learn they can change when they so choose.

Our students do not want to grow up because, like their counterpart of the 1950s Holden Caulfield (Salinger, 1951), they view adults as corrupted and passionless. Their goals were to have fun and be free. These adolescents rarely considered future payoffs and consequences. Their impulsive behavior can be explained because they have been governed by feelings that they did not understand, rather than by rational thought. Our students have been in perpetual motion by creating constant crises that made it impossible to work with them while they lived at home or were at school in their communities. These adolescents have been programmed by the same computer that instructs them to: "Attack before being attacked." "Reject before being rejected." "Devour before being devoured." "Betray before being betrayed." The fight-flight syndrome is reenacted daily. Many have medicated themselves by using psychoactive substances in a desperate effort to neutralize the pain and depression.

These are formidable psychological problems which need to be resolved before students will be able to focus and produce quality work academically. What does The John Dewey Academy do?

Rather than reconstruct the past—because nothing can be done to modify it—the present and the future are emphasized. Students repeatedly are asked whether their current behavior is helping them achieve their future goals. A confrontation psychotherapeutic orientation (Bratter, 1974b) not only attacks denial and dysfunctional patterns of thought but also suggests solutions (Bratter, 1974b). Confrontation, which can be personally painful, is viewed as a nurturing act because it communicates responsible concern. It becomes more difficult for students to unlearn behavior when there has been parental pathology and social injustice, but these factors do not negate success. The concept of choice becomes crucial when making plans for the future. Adolescents are encouraged to take control of their lives. Students recognize they have been their worst enemies. They can blame themselves for their failures.

The John Dewey Academy uses the power of positive peer pressure, which is the antidote to what may have prompted them to join the drug culture. A caring community is created (Raubolt & Bratter, 1976). Peers bond together. The caring community teaches its members how to help and be helped, how to depend and be dependable, how to trust and be trusted, and how to love and be loved. Students believe if they dare to dream, if they dare to do, then they can succeed when they support each other.

The classroom needs to be changed from a competitive environment to a cooperative one. *Paper Chase* (Osborn, 1971) illustrates the benefits of students pooling their resources to form study groups at Harvard Law School. This practice can be implemented in high school because students assume responsibility for their learning. What criteria are used to evaluate the effectiveness of The John Dewey Academy?

The John Dewey Academy wishes to be judged by the reputa-

tions of the colleges that admit our graduates. College placement admittedly is ambitious because our students' past academic performances are at best mediocre. The John Dewey Academy uses its best efforts to convince colleges of quality to admit graduates by assuming an aggressive advocate stance (Bratter, 1977). Graduation from college becomes the most effective way to seal off pathetic past performances while concurrently maximizing the probability of future academic, professional, and social success.

I know from working with adolescents who behave irresponsibly and who are self-destructive that sometimes this can be a frustrating experience. I wonder how you view this situation.

There are times when it is painful and draining. I believe there can be no finer human affirmation than for me to know that I have made the difference by helping adolescents reclaim their lives from failure and to achieve the greatness of which they are capable.

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