

A Healthy School Environment¹

Aleksandar Bogojević

Education systems in the world are caught between two seemingly contradictory views. Some pander to the average student and thus enter a dangerous spiral of lowering standards of education. Others measure their success mainly through the achievements of its most talented students in various kinds of competitions. The end result of this is bad for the average student, however, in the long run it is not very helpful for the top students as well. There is a third way - in fact not one but many. Unfortunately, as a rule, these healthy environments are very rare.

A healthy school asks a lot from its teachers. They need to be true masters of the craft of disseminating knowledge, at the same time they need to be conversant with an ever growing body of knowledge in any given field. Still, knowledge is not enough. The rate of change is too fast - knowledge itself becomes outdated. More than ever, it becomes necessary to teach general problem solving skills; to focus more on the asking of pertinent questions than the enumerating of ready-made answers.

Even the best school needs to be but one facet of the total education environment. We live in a time of an extended computer and communications revolution. Certain software packages on the market already "outperform" most teachers. Multimedia presentations on the Internet and on CD-ROMs enable students to have a close contact with the best teachers as well as with researchers working on the forefront of science. The main characteristics of the new media are its expandability and flexibility. The high speed and low price of the new communication technologies enable the formation of *ad hoc* groups of teachers and students located in various countries all over the globe.

The future of education, however, is not solely virtual. The most important things are not taught through computers or books. Basic cultural values, an appreciation of beauty and craftsmanship, and ethical principles are best mediated through a close personal contact between student and teacher. The interaction between students is just as important. Most problems in this interaction stem from trying to fit all students into a small number of fixed molds. Rather than playing down the individual differences in student interests and capabilities, a healthy school environment uses these differences. There is no set way to create such an enriching environment. A necessary condition is that the teachers *believe* that such an environment is possible. The easiest way to achieve this is to expose the teachers to just such a surrounding.

¹ Published in the Petnica Science Center Almanac, Number 17, 1998.