

The Magic of Involvement

Cameron W. Meredith
Southern Illinois University

It is the conviction of this writer that the more involved people are the more responsible they become. Specifically, the more freedom people are given to become involved in a democratic experiment, the more responsible they will become by working toward rather than against the creation of a democratic society.

When there is involvement and active participation in planning, decision-making, working and evaluation, there is little working against and sabotaging of our own efforts. The most powerful means of developing responsible people is finding more creative ways of involving them in cooperative activities.

Youth are often referred to as the misplaced people of our society. Indeed there is difficulty in finding truly worthwhile things for our youth to do. Seldom are they engaged in projects which are of vital significance to them. Through responsible behavior in high school and college, some young people feel that they are involved, that they have a place, and that they do belong. Unfortunately, the majority of young people do not find school relevant; thus, many of them drop out both psychologically and physically at an early age. Rather than an experience in relevant learning, involvement, and cooperation, school too often is based on obedience, competitive relationships, and the acquisition of knowledge purely for the sake of knowledge.

Involvement and Responsibility

While responsibility and trustworthiness are desirable, there is no agreement as to what is meant by responsibility. For one who believes in an autocratic atmosphere, responsible behavior is associated with respect for adults, obedience, consistency, and learning to do what one is told to do. On the other hand, self-selection, self-motivation, self-direction, self-discipline, and self-evaluation are associated with responsible behavior in a democratic atmosphere. These differences account for our present dilemma.

If one really believes that our destiny hinges upon learning more and better ways of relating democratically, then we need to begin questioning ideas concerning responsibility which have been carried over from the autocratic past. We need to develop beliefs and values which are more related to the present and the future. For example, even by 1980, there may be no need for learning responsible behavior associated with doing what the boss tells one to do. *The idea that young people learn responsibility by doing homework, cleaning their rooms, or washing dishes because teachers and parents insist that they do it, is questionable indeed.* Rather than the development of active creative, cooperative and self-propelled people, the result instead could be the development of apathetic, irresponsible, and passive individuals expecting to be ordered by others.

Involvement and Cooperation

If it is believed that involvement and cooperation are absolute essentials in the development of more responsible people in a democratic society, it is particularly important that our classrooms and homes provide necessary experiences for young people. Needless to say, very few of our classrooms or homes provide these opportunities; however, a significant number of teachers and parents are aware of the magic of involvement and the humanness of cooperative relations. Unfortunately, most teachers and parents are locked into the competitive atmosphere of a directing, superior-inferior relationship and a discouraging system of reward and punishment.

More often than not, both teachers and parents find that they must eliminate the things which mitigate against involvement and cooperation before much progress can be made. For example, teachers and parents can discontinue many things they do which pit young people against each other. They can stop being the boss by both getting out of the directing and the punishment-reward roles.

Involvement in the School

There are many things that schools and teachers can do to involve students and to provide experiences in cooperative living. At the outset, schools can offer students a variety of electives, a choice of teachers, and a flexible schedule. A truly representative student government is a necessity for a total feeling of involvement in most large schools. From the very beginning, the teacher can involve students through teacher-pupil planning.

By providing many alternatives and an opportunity for self-selection, students can make their own decisions. As students pursue their self-selected work, they can experience self-motivation and self-discipline. Even more important than planning and work, students should be involved in self-evaluation. This leads to even more involvement in planning and work. Teachers can do much to encourage a spirit of helping in which students move toward rather than away from each other by working together. Small-group as well as large-group activities can provide students with experience in cooperative relationships.

Involvement in the Family

Parents also can do much to provide experiences in involvement and cooperation. Through a family council, for example, every member of the family can volunteer to do his share of tasks which the whole family recognizes as necessary for normal living. It becomes an experience in decision-making and cooperation rather than an experience in being told what to do.

Parents can learn how to provide children with the opportunity to experience the natural consequences of their behavior, which is really an experience in self-evaluation, rather than an experience in obedience through the use of punishment and reward. With involvement, cooperation, and mutual trust for each other, every member of the family has a much better chance of becoming a truly responsible person.

Involvement and Democratic Relationships

Perhaps the most crucial factor in the magic of involvement is the creation of democratic relationships between teachers and students and between parents and children. The key is how parents and teachers behave. The following checklist may assist by describing the often subtle differences between democratic and autocratic ways of behaving.

Democratic

Relate equally as human being
Use intrinsic motivation
Trust
Influence
Challenge
Invite, offer choices
Create cooperative atmosphere
Recognize, regard
Use self-evaluation
teacher and pupils plan together
Create family council
Encourage decision-making
Mind own behavior
Use natural consequences

Autocratic

Relate as superiors and inferiors
Use extrinsic motivation
Respect
Control
Threat
Comand, boss
Impose competitive atmosphere
Praise, flatter
Give marks, rewards
Only teacher decides
Only parents decide
Demand obedience
Mind behavior of others
Use punishment

Summary

The more involved people are the more responsible they become. The more responsible they become, the more they feel they belong. When they feel they belong, they become the self-directed, contributing, useful, cooperative, and responsible human beings who are so desperately needed in our evolving democracy. Implementation of the "Magic of Involvement" could mean our very survival.