

Why Do These Kids Love School?

Ms. Raywid describes a film that has powerful lessons to teach, including the simple message that there are schools in this country "where innovation is the norm, mutual respect is the standard, and children truly enjoy learning."

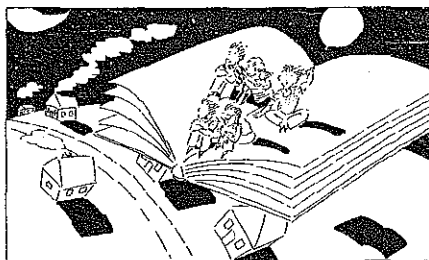
BY MARY ANNE RAYWID

THE TITLE of this article is taken directly from the title of an extraordinary film that has an extraordinary history and makes an extraordinary impact on viewers. Almost everything about "Why Do These Kids Love School?" — its sponsorship, its topic, its length, its distribution, and its amazing success — breaks the mold of "educational films." Many educators have asked, "Why isn't there a film that makes schooling as vivid and appealing as movies manage to make other things?" This film is the answer. Moreover, as one reviewer put it, "This could be the most important media coverage that child-centered education has ever received."

"Why Do These Kids Love School?" is an extremely powerful statement that viewers have described as "moving," "inspiring," and "creating hope." It manages not only to produce a strong emotional impact but also to provide a remarkably intimate look at life inside nine different schools. It successfully conveys a sense of the spirit and personality of the schools portrayed, and it even manages to suggest something of what makes them tick.

The film is the work of a filmmaker who, out of a combination of curiosity and gratitude, set out to make a movie

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about the school her children had attended. She began with a sense of the discrepancy between the way most children experience school and the joyousness with which her two daughters had experienced it.

And so, Dorothy Fadiman set out to make a documentary about the Peninsula School, a 65-year-old independent, progressively oriented school in Menlo Park, California. As she tells it, the challenge proved so fascinating that she spent several years filming at the school. Eventually, realizing that viewers might attribute the activities and successes of Peninsula to an advantaged population and selective admissions, Fadiman set out to find other schools — public schools — with a similar orientation. She ultimately included in the film portraits of eight additional schools, scattered across the country. "Why Do These Kids Love School?" captures something of the essence of each individual school and identifies some characteristics common to all nine of them.

The film has racked up an amazing array of prizes, but for producer Dorothy Fadiman, who also wrote the script, it remains first and foremost an act of love. Fadiman, the mother of two adult children, has more than a touch of the counterculture and the flower child about her — with the enormous sensitivity and compassion of that era combined with its concern for the vulnerability of the young. There is also a spirituality about her, along with a great deal of intensity, commitment, and dedication. She set out to make a picture that would move and inspire as well as inform. The first question she asks of audiences when the lights go up after a screening is frequently surprising and disarming: "Did it bring tears to your eyes?" For an overwhelming number of viewers, the answer is yes.

Teachers are accustomed to portrayals of classrooms that make them cringe. Only rarely can professionals in the field find a noneducator's understanding of teaching to be terribly penetrating or insightful. How did Fadiman manage it?

Part of the answer seems to lie in her own unusual capacity to learn. She listens and observes with total absorption — and acts on what she has learned. I will never forget my surprise when, months after our first conversation, I discovered that she had filmed almost every school that I had suggested to her. After the first version of the film was made and we had had several more conversations, she made changes that reflected the advice I and others had offered.

Critics share the enthusiasm of audiences for this film. Since its premiere in May 1990, "Why Do These Kids Love School?" has won a number of coveted awards — in national competitions involving thousands of entries, in one in-

ternational film festival that drew submissions from 47 nations, in competitions limited to educational films, and in competitions involving a variety of areas. It took the 1990 award for best documentary in a San Francisco/San Jose competition (the Joeys), it took the blue ribbon at the 1991 American Film and Video Festival, it earned a Golden Eagle from the Council on International Non-theatrical Events (which means it will represent the U.S. in film festivals abroad), and it won a Silver Apple in the National Educational Film Festival.

Just one of the remarkable things about this film is the way it has been distributed. Since Fadiman produced it herself, with no sales organization behind her, she began distributing it from her home at below-cost prices. However, she was soon assisted by enthusiastic teachers across the country who volunteered to help with distribution within their areas. Today, the film has been purchased by a large number of schools and districts, and it has been bought and distributed by a number of regional organizations. In Hawaii, for example, the Honolulu chapter of the League of Women Voters is in the process of purchasing 50 copies for distribution to that city's elementary schools. The Iowa education department has sought funding to distribute the film in that state. And, after viewing the film, the *Kappan* editors asked me to write this article to inform their readers about the film.

ONE OF THE most unusual attributes of this film is the range of audiences to which it appeals. To mark the beginning of the school year, "Why Do These Kids Love School?" was shown on public television last fall for the second year in a row. It is widely used by parent and civic groups. But it is also used in courses that prepare teacher aides and other paraprofessionals, in teacher preparation courses, and even in courses that prepare experienced teachers to become supervisors. At the same time, the film has been used with youngsters in high school, in junior high, and in the elementary grades as a way of getting them to talk about their school experiences and what they would like them to be.

Just how does a film achieve such

broad appeal? First, it tells the story of the Peninsula School, and it traces a Peninsula education from preschool to eighth-grade graduation. Classrooms and activities are shown at each age and grade level — beginning with a toddler's struggle to manage a hose and culminating in a young adolescent's tearful ambivalence about moving on to high school. The other schools portrayed carry the story of child-centered education into the high school. Altogether, the film runs for nearly an hour, though most viewers are surprised to discover that the time has passed so quickly.

Without the use of tedious labels, "Why Do These Kids Love School?" manages to convey something of significance about the educational process at each level. For instance, a scene in a first-grade science lab shows how observations lead to discovery and how children's ideas can be handled in ways that transmit important affective as well as cognitive messages. There is considerable emphasis throughout on schools, teachers, and parents as cultivators of human beings. Indeed, there is as much to do with the shaping of young lives as with the process of schooling.

It might even be said that this film reveals a powerful hidden curriculum. It evokes considerable thought about what schools are for and why we need them in the first place. In the admiring words of one reviewer, it offers "a gentle reminder that our educational priorities have gotten skewed somehow." Questions of educational mission and of the values we want schools to impart become for many viewers the center of the film. The film places considerable emphasis on freedom, but it also stresses the cooperation and creativity that freedom should yield. Autonomy is one theme, but so is building trust, community, and collaboration.

A second message that the film conveys is that good education is doable. The negative views of education that have characterized the past decade — and the circumstances that gave rise to them — have sometimes made it seem that we are incapable of offering education that is simultaneously effective, high in quality, equitable, and appealing. "Why Do These Kids Love School?" presents a countervailing (and heartening) point of view. The students and teachers in the

nine schools it portrays are "turned on and tuned in."

Moreover, Fadiman was careful to include all kinds of student populations from all parts of the country. While she begins with a small, predominantly white and middle-class independent school, she also shows inner-city public schools whose students are largely minority youngsters from the working class or from the urban underclass. Classroom scenes and interviews were filmed in East Harlem, Minneapolis, and New Orleans, as well as in Lakewood, Colorado; Lowell and Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Jackson, Mississippi. They illustrate everything from carefully integrated curricula to a focus on individual learning styles and from cooperative learning to unusual roles for students, teachers, and parents.

What is particularly striking about the history of "Why Do These Kids Love School?" is the wide range of purposes for which it has proved effective. When she learned I was writing this article, Dorothy Fadiman wrote to a number of the people who had contacted her and asked them to share with me just how they have used the film. The array of responses was impressive. Here is a brief sampling. One school reported showing it to the school board "to acquaint them with the mission and purpose of the school." Others use it as a consciousness-raising experience to stimulate awareness of the distance between the "is" and the "ought to be" and so to demonstrate a need for change. Still others use it for inspirational purposes — to generate hope or to heal the wounds of disillusionment. One principal reported that he planned to show it annually to his teachers at the beginning of the school year to heighten dedication and commitment and to help them "rekindle the essential spark."

While it carefully avoids being didactic, the film nonetheless carries substantial freight. It urges child-centered education, considerable individual responsibility for learners, an emphasis on motivation, a personalized and supportive school environment, active engagement of learners with the material to be learned, the centrality of the human community, and a thorough interweaving of the affective, cognitive, and social aspects of development during the school years.

By virtue of its rich demonstration of these and other educational principles,

"Why Do These Kids Love School?" has been used in a variety of professional courses, including classes on instructional methods, educational movements, methods of supervision, students at risk, theories of counseling, alternative education, and child and adolescent development. Even in areas for which the film has little direct application — e.g., school administration — its universal appeal seems to make it useful for sparking discussion of such matters as the kinds of roles played by the educators in the schools depicted, the kinds of scheduling arrangements that these schools require, and the kinds of school organization needed to support and sustain these learning environments.

The usefulness of the film to school administrators is suggested by Thomas Peters, of corporate excellence fame, in his introduction to the film. Peters points out that the schools depicted portray just the sorts of circumstances that "make miracles" in any workplace. Workers are given the autonomy and responsibility to control their own operation, they are encouraged to collaborate with their peers, they are controlled more by a shared set of values and guiding principles than by rules and regulations, and they are made to feel like important and valued contributors to a significant enterprise. The schools depicted manage to establish these conditions for teachers as well as for students.

One reason why such organizational features are present in this group of schools is that all are alternative schools — which have been shown to differ substantially from other public schools with respect to their autonomy within the system and the way in which they operate as organizations.¹ But alternative schools also typically differ from traditional schools in what they stand for educationally and in the pedagogy they employ. This is another feature of the film that makes its broad appeal so surprising: lately, alternative education has not had the endorsement of a great many educators in this country. It is not an educational orientation that a great many parents are demanding for their youngsters or that many reformers are urging for schools.

Yet if this film is any test — and I suspect it may be — the features of alternative education enjoy enormous appeal.


On the one hand, that should not be entirely surprising, since a great many of these features are currently being urged separately as school improvement measures (e.g., cross-disciplinary study, downsizing, personalization, and learner engagement). On the other hand, it is certainly food for thought that a somewhat marginalized type of schooling should generate such positive response from professionals, parents, and the public.

"Why Do These Kids Love School?" has powerful lessons to teach, including the simple message that there are schools in this country "where innovation is the norm, mutual respect is the standard, and children truly enjoy learning." But even where its teachings are neither new nor novel, this film manages to present them in enormously attractive ways. My own calling prevents me from concluding that words are superfluous or unnecessary. But this film is a vivid reminder that there are often more direct and powerful ways of getting a point across. For example, a big part of the message of the film was articulated by an esteemed scholar and educational philosopher 30 years ago.

The essence of the curriculum . . . consists not of objective lessons to be learned and courses to be passed, but of the scheme of values, ideals, or life goals which are mediated through the materials of instruction. The really significant outcome of education is the set of governing commitments, the aims for living that the learner develops. The various subjects of study are simply means for the communication and appropriation of these values.²

Dorothy Fadiman's film reframes this message in ways that speak directly to the heart. It is, as one of the people who wrote to me put it, "a beautiful statement on the power of education, the unlimited potential of children, and the importance of teachers."

1. Daniel L. Duke, "Challenge to Bureaucracy: The Contemporary Alternative School," *Journal of Educational Thought*, May 1976, pp. 34-48; John Nirenberg, "A Comparison of the Management Systems of Traditional and Alternative Public High Schools," *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Winter 1977, pp. 86-104; and Mary Anne Raywid, "Synthesis of Research on Schools of Choice," *Educational Leadership*, April, 1984, pp. 70-78.

2. Philip Phenix, *Education and the Common Good* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 18. 

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