About the Authors

Christine A. Johnston is Assistant Professor of Educational Administration at Rowan. She holds a B.A. from Wisconsin–Eau Claire, an M.A. from Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and an Ed.D. from Rutgers. She received fellowships and awards from the National Science Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Kolbe Foundation of Phoenix.

Author of Empowering the Organization through Professional Talk, she specializes in action research focusing on communication, leadership, supervision, and conation.

Gary R. Dainton is pursuing an M.A. in Environmental Studies at Rowan. A graduate assistant in Educational Administration, he is working on one study for the Doctorate in Leadership and another study for NCATE. His B.S. is from Eastern Connecticut State University.

His thesis is on the foundations and trends of environmental consulting and remediation.
Death by Classroom: Perpetrators and Victims

Christine A. Johnston and Gary R. Dainton

Abstract
“Death by Classroom” refers to the daily struggle of public school students whose chief difficulty is being caught in a formalized system of education that does not address their conative needs—that is, the students’ natural approach to completing assigned tasks. This article details the plight of these at-risk learners and their school experiences, focusing on the negative effects which occur when students are forced to use their conation to learn in spite of the limitations of the typical classroom/desk setting. The authors reflect on their personal and research experiences within this formalized system and conclude that conation has a profound effect on students’ academic achievement in today’s formalized classroom environment.

Introduction
Each day American students are losing their will to learn, their desire to strive and succeed in the classroom. These students experience “Death by Classroom.” This article does not attribute blame. Instead, its authors tell their individual and diverse experiences from the perspectives of perpetrators
and victims of this phenomenon. We begin with the classroom teacher.

_The Unintentional Perpetrator_

As a classroom teacher, I was always afraid I would hinder the intellectual development of the brightest and best learners who were certain to enter my classroom. Consequently, each fall I would scan my classes, looking for that bright face, listening for those words indicative of mental acuity, and searching for eyes denoting depth and insight.

As I completed my perusal, I would silently pray, “Oh Lord, don’t let me hold a student back because of my own intellectual limitations.” Interestingly, I could never figure out who the brightest was because while one student was brilliant in writing, another brought perspicuity to class discussions, and yet another provided a novel approach to completing the most tedious of learning tasks. Who, then, I asked was the brightest and best?

Years later I learned what I had recognized as unique modes of performance were actually different learning styles. With this awareness came other insights, including the realization that by focusing my concerns on averting harm to the academically achieving learner, I was ignoring the plight of those students who did the “work-of-the-classroom,” but completed only what was required, and then, to a limited degree. These students, who met with a modicum of success, were obvious in their dislike of the subject matter and of school in general. Unmotivated and underachieving, they plodded their way through twelve years of schooling, rarely, if ever, experiencing a spark of excitement about learning. These students chose not to participate actively in the “corral ’em, teach ’em, and test ’em” educational process. Many dropped out mentally, if not physically, long before reaching the twelfth grade.

This was brought vividly to mind this past summer when I read the obituary of an eighteen-year-old, who was tragically killed in a Memorial Day weekend accident (Webber, 1993). The story of the young man’s death was all too familiar—the
celebration of his friends' high school graduation, a celebration that ended in death.

The obituary read like that of anyone whose life has been cut short, whose experiences are too few to require long columns of print citing achievements, community affiliations, and awards. In place of a recitation of life-long attainments were remarks of family and friends. It was among these remembrances that I learned the victim had dropped out of school the previous year. The young man's employer, the owner of a landscaping and pool business, said he had grown to know and respect the ability of the young man who had left high school in the fall to work as a yard manager at the garden center.

Even more striking was the grandfather's account of his grandson's struggles in school. The grandfather said his grandson was "happiest when he was out-of-doors, fishing, or hunting with his golden retriever. My grandson was intelligent but restless in a classroom" (Webber, 1993). He added that after working for a year, the grandson realized he needed more education to be successful and had been considering going back to vocational school.

After reading the newspaper account, I was left with this question: Was this young man's death by auto the only death he had experienced in his brief life, or was this a culminating tragedy, preceded by another type of death, the death of a student by public education (Kozol, 1968)?

Let us now look at the experience of a victim of "Death by Classroom," a student whose experience is vital to understanding this educational tragedy.

The Victim: The Voice of a Student
From my earliest memories of education in nursery school, I had anxiety about sitting in the classroom with unfamiliar people and being forced to learn. I always felt that the educational setting was more like a punishment or jail sentence than a safe harbor of learning. Students were sentenced during the first week of September and paroled during the
third week of June. The same question arose throughout my formal schooling: Why am I here?

I hated school. But I didn’t know why. I have come to realize that there are others who had similar fears and anxieties about public school, unable to articulate their overwhelming despair even now. Today, there are students in public schools who have the same fears and depression I once experienced. These students are labeled lazy, dysfunctional, delinquent, obstructive, or just plain stupid. These students are victims, not of a premeditated crime, but of a theory of expendability. It is time to address the problems of these disenfranchised students and realize that they have untapped potential. They are victims of an unresponsive educational system, suffering from an overwhelming ignorance of their plight within the educational setting.

**Forces, Influences, and Factors**

While it is not possible to know all the forces, influences, and factors which contribute to students’ lack of achievement in public education, we believe it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the components in students’ learning profiles that explain why they give up on school.

Gordon Allport suggests, “To be truly acquainted with a person means to be able to take his point of view, to think within his frame of reference, to reason from his premises” (1961, p. 249). Making an acquaintance with this type of student begins with examining three key aspects of his learning profile: the student’s cognition, affection, and conation.

“Intelligent but restless in the classroom,” is the way the system might describe the unfortunate eighteen-year-old high school drop-out who died in the car crash. He would be considered cognitively capable of learning, but affectively disengaged. We know that he “didn’t enjoy school” and conatively was happiest when active in the out-of-doors.

Is this not the “unmotivated and underachieving” student who “drops out” of the educational process without either the system’s recognition of his style of learning or validation of his
knowledge base? The facts as presented bring us to the conclusion that there is nothing new in this profile. It is the same frustrating description of potential and failure teachers and administrators see day in and day out. What, then, can be learned by revisiting this territory, especially when the fate of such a student appears sealed?

An answer to this very important question is found in the third area of an individual’s learning profile—the student’s conation or will to learn. In the study of conation and its effects upon the learning process, public schools can gain insight into the implications and potential of addressing the cognitively capable student. This student’s conation places him or her into a conative mode of learning which does not fit the traditional classroom.

Conation is one’s self-direction, volition, focus, intentionality, and striving (Assagioli, 1973). It is the natural approach each individual takes to completing a given task. Kolbe (1987) has done pioneering work in the field of conation, resulting in the development of an instrument which identifies how an individual’s conation/volition manifests itself through behaviors. She classified the “act of doing” into four categories, which she termed Action Modes and defined as “the focused use of energy which each of us exerts in order to begin and accomplish any task.” The Action Modes, or the “natural ways of doing tasks,” are categorized and quantified on the Kolbe Conative Index as varying levels of Fact Finder, Follow Thru, Quick Start, and Implementor (Kolbe, 1987; 1993).

The Implementor

It is the Implementor/Learner who forms the basis of this discussion of the “intelligent-but-restless-and-underachieving-in-the-classroom” student. Conative research on student learners clarifies why it is so important for educators to understand the conation of this type of student-learner (Altmann, 1992; Corno, 1993; Snow, 1993). They are physically charged individuals who possess an uncanny sense of their
immediate environment. They enjoy taking physical risks from which they experience a natural high.

These same individuals seek to be responsible for handling important tasks on their own, especially in stressful situations. As one high school student explained, “When the game gets down to crunch time and our team needs a big play, I tell the guys, ‘Just give me the ball... I want the ball... I will take care of this.’” This sense of being able to get the job done by going the extra mile is a primary characteristic of the Implementor/Learner. While others might view this behavior as arrogance, it is in fact the Implementor’s strong sense of self-direction and self-determination which motivates him or her to take charge.

To that end, when an Implementor is confronted by a physical challenge, he or she will accept the challenge “quickly, effectively, productively, and efficiently.” When an Implementor/Learner comes across something that is not working or a plan that is not progressing correctly, that person will typically say, “Enough of this! Get out of my way. I’m going to do it.” As one Implementor said, “It’s instinctual with me. I just say, ‘Get out of the way. I’ll do it!’” (Johnston, 1993a).

Implementors also hold tenaciously to their independence and freedom as they seek to confront and dominate any physical challenge which presents itself. As persons of few words, they seek to know what is asked of them, and then, given the opportunity to problem-solve on their own, “do what needs to be done” without being required to explain their concerns or affective considerations toward the task.

Practical Research

Two studies of the effects of conation upon an Implementor/Learner’s productivity and self-esteem provide additional insights into the challenges facing an Implementor in an educational setting. The first study is based on a specific student population extrapolated from a larger study (Johnston & Dainton, 1993). The second involves a case-study-in-retrospect, retracing the schooling experiences of a cognitively capable but conatively disaffected learner.
In the first instance, a total of 132 subjects, including 6th grade math, 7th grade English, and 9th grade world history students, participated in a 12-week study to examine student responses to assignments which either matched the student’s conative Insistent Action Mode or required a response which went against the conative grain of the student.

Observers noted that those students whose conative profile identified them as Fact Finders initiated their assignments by first “asking questions, looking in their notes, and finding the answers.” Follow Thrus immediately looked for the steps they needed to follow and then sorted out the assignment into parts to complete. Quick Starts “just jumped in” and began “discussing the assignment immediately.” Implementors, on the other hand, preferred to remain aloof and “figure things out” by themselves. An examination of the learning profiles of the 12 students who were identified as Insistent Implementors reveals that each scored significantly above the 50th percentile, based on the national percentile rank for the areas of English, social studies, and math. Their self-declared interest in learning the subject matter also demonstrated a mean of three on a five-point Lickert scale. However, it is the students’ own descriptions of their “doing” of the various assignments which provide the clearest insight into the Implementor/Learner.

The students repeatedly described their motivation to do the typical paper-and-pencil Fact Finder seat work as, “boring,” “too easy,” and “nothing to this.” On the other hand, they described those learning tasks which required them to use their area of conative Implementor insistence as “the best assignment so far this year,” “cool,” “really got into it,” “I liked the challenge; it wasn’t as hard as I thought,” and “I liked this type of assignment, but I need more time and things to work with.”

When these students were asked, “What is the first thing that goes through your mind when you get an assignment?” each responded, without exception, “Just getting it done!” “Getting things done,” and “Getting them done my way.” After all, these are the physically charged doers who rebel against the

When asked how they would like to be able to "do" their school work, each of the twelve Implementor/Learners used similar words and phrases, such as, "I like doing my own work," "I like working alone," "I like working alone better," "I figure things out by myself," "I sit down with paper and draw it," and "I like to figure out a problem by myself and then solve it."

Students were also asked, "How do you come to understand how to do an assignment?" Again the responses were similar: "I like being the person who puts it all together," and "I like to build things. I like projects if they let me do it my way." When these students work in a group, they "like them [other students] to listen...." Implementor/Learners say, "I like to have them do it the way I want it done." They also say, "I'd like to pick my group. I think they would listen to me better."

A Case Study

The conative behaviors of this type of learner are elaborated upon in the second study. Here, an individual, years older than the students who participated in the classroom studies, reflects upon his experiences in a public school environment and confirms the need of the Implementor/Learner to be able to learn in the least restrictive environment:

I can remember that I had difficulty learning in many school and classroom situations. For one thing, I didn't enjoy sitting at my desk doing rows and rows of math problems. I've always enjoyed having a debate or problem solving. I think some of my frustration as an Implementor in the classroom was created by the insecurity I felt when I just didn't want to be sitting in the classroom participating in activities that I had little interest in and felt little importance in completing.

My favorite "class" was recess because that was unrestricted time where I could do what interested me with nobody telling me if my performance was adequate. Recess
was a catharsis; it allowed me to release my classroom anxiety while recharging my energies to make it through the rest of the day. It seemed as though I couldn’t create any bonds with people in the classroom, but during recess it seemed as though Implementors had an internal magnet which drew them together.

In terms of my learning, I am very analytical. Everything has to make sense. The majority of what I have learned, I have assessed and analyzed myself. In past classes, I would prefer to be in the corner by myself, trying to figure out something without someone directing me or looking over me. Trial and error was—and continues to be—the most important component of my learning processes. Practical and analytical problem solving is the key for the Implementor. It took me a long time to understand how to be a successful student. I’ve had people preach to me about how to be a successful student. I’ve taken courses on how to be a good student, but it is something I have come across myself. I have figured out that the key to becoming a good student is to develop your own strategy or process for learning and to use that process every day.

I can remember as a seventh grader being called down to the guidance counselor’s office during class to discuss my “laziness” in the classroom. After overcoming the embarrassment of being called out of class, I entered the guidance counselor’s office and sat there until he was ready to address me. This “guidance” counselor then tried some child psychology babble on me to create some sort of bond. Then the counselor began to tell me that I was not trying in or out of class and that I had to overcome my laziness.

I saw right through the whole “scared straight” lecture, and most of all, I resented this stranger telling me how to be a good student when I didn’t care about school and was miserable going to school. I resented... what this professional educator had to say to me, and, if anything, it alienated me further from the mainstream educational process. If I had not been motivated by the fear of repercussions from my
parents, I am sure I would have never made it through my formal schooling.

I hated going to school while I was growing up, and I hate sitting in lectures today. It is almost a weekly process of my debating as to whether I want to continue with my graduate education. My interests lie in places other than the educational setting, but now I have the ability to see the larger picture of what it takes to be successful in this culture.

*The Consequences of Irrelevance*

The Implementor/Learner frequently sees what goes on in the classroom as irrelevant and withdraws from the learning community, seeking anonymity rather than interaction with it. If we take seriously the urging of Ernest Boyer, who for years has called for relevance in the public classroom, we will act to keep the Implementor/Learner engaged in relevant learning activities. After all, as Boyer stated recently, "It is our duty as educators to protect a child's potential, not destroy it" (1993).

To engage the student before he or she withdraws requires that we first identify the Implementors/Students among us; secondly, that we provide relevant subject matter; and finally, that we offer opportunities for independence, freedom, self-direction, and active doing.

If we fail to provide these learning opportunities, we will perpetuate a system in which the Implementor is "demeaned by those who give more prestige to acquired skills or educated disciplines" (Kolbe, 1987, p. 194). And we will continue year after year to victimize those students whose conative grain goes against a classroom environment which only values the learning of formal operations in an abstract context.

The message is clear. We can no longer afford to ignore the impact of the conative factor upon student learning. When we do, we are allowing, in Mark Twain's words, "the educational system to get in the way of our education." If we refuse to identify and address the conative factor in the learning process, then we are, at the very least, condemning all students to less effective learning environments. More tragically, we are pass-
ing a death sentence upon the Implementor/Learner in our classrooms. “I know you can’t set up a program for everybody dying in the classroom. But something has to be done for the Implementors. They’re being killed.”

Alternatives for the Future

Before we examine alternatives, it is important to understand that no single factor causes an Implementor’s “death.” Consequently, when we talk of addressing the “death” of a learner, we need to consider much more than one of the contributing factors.

At this point, it is apparent that “Death by Classroom” is a metaphorical reference which suggests that the classroom consists of much more than the physical trappings of the chalkboards, desks, and bulletin boards. In this article, “classroom” refers to the totality of the physical, emotional, and human interaction which occurs during a given period of time within a specific schedule and setting. The physical context, the time organization, the nature of the work to be done, and the interaction or lack of interaction with fellow learners comprise what these authors mean by “classroom.”

Beginning with classroom instruction, teachers can develop a much needed awareness of their students’ conative learning mode. In the case of Implementor/Learners, teachers need to be prepared to set them free. Show them a picture, a design, or a strategy for doing something in the briefest terms possible and set them free to try and figure it out by themselves. “You’ve go to set them free. That’s how you teach Implementors. Give them a puzzle. Let them try to figure something out. The analytical part is just as important as the physical part. The Implementor needs to build something. Not just Lincoln Logs. It needs to be on a grander scale. Use more problem solving in which people can design and build something. I think that would be primary for Implementors. You’ve got to let these people go” (Johnston, 1993c).

Two things are certain: an Implementor/Learner cannot change his or her learning style, even when confronted with
the frequently used Fact Finder/Follow Thru teaching methods used in most of America's classrooms. Another approach, such as providing more personal attention, won't solve the dilemma faced by the Implementor/Learner either. In fact, more personal attention may aggravate the already negative learning experience. This occurs because of the Implementor's strong sense of individuality and conscious desire to have less community affiliation within the classroom. Consequently, the standard approaches to addressing students' style through teaching and affective strategies aren't enough.

If the challenge of teaching an Implementor/Learner goes beyond reconstituting the teaching behaviors which occur within the physical confines, then where does the public school system turn next to address the conative learning style of the Implementor and bring him or her into the "learning fold"? The public schools can begin by examining how the school curriculum is structured. As schools are currently designed, both academically and physically, "the words classroom and Implementor just aren't compatible, in the sense that you have to sit down all day long and take notes while the teacher lectures" (Johnston, 1993b). In a recent Kappan article, Hartman raises this same issue: "Why are these creative, highly social people shut up in a room with me all day long studying algebra, English, physical science, and world history? Is this really the most constructive use of their time?" Earlier in the same article, she states that students need to "get into an active role, puzzling out complex problems that have applications in the 'real world.' " She concludes, "If we're serious about increasing learning, we'll create a new design for today's schools." Until such time as we address the stultifying environment of public education, schools—as they currently operate—will continue to endanger learners, not the least among them the Implementor/Learners. Recently, Secretary of Education Richard Riley declared that a "quiet crisis" exists in public education. He is correct. The Implementor/Learner is at the heart of the quiet crisis. Yet Secretary Riley did not cite these students as the victims. Instead, he identified students
who traditionally score in the top 3 to 5 percent of IQ and achievement tests as those who are not sufficiently challenged during their school day (Jordan, 1993).

How sad that this major force in public education has failed to mourn the loss of the twenty to thirty percent of public school students (Boyer, 1985) who are dying daily in classrooms across this nation because their talents for learning are not recognized or nurtured.

The number of these victims will continue to increase until the perpetrators of this “Death by Classroom” recognize that the “brightest and best” are not defined solely by standardized academic achievement but consist of an array of students who deserve the opportunity to use their unique combinations of cognitive, affective, and conative strengths to develop their individual learning systems.

References


