

Psychological Living Room for Elementary Teachers

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Effective teaching is basically an expression of the total personality of the teacher. Roderick G. Langston discusses the influence of the culture and its institutions on the teacher's personality and points out that if we are to understand teachers we must also understand the culture which has helped shape their attitudes, dispositions, and feelings. Mr. Langston is assistant professor of education at the University of Oregon, Eugene.



THOSE OF US who would help elementary teachers improve their classroom practices must first learn to understand and accept them as people. Too often educational leaders operate in their practices as though facts and statements of method were all that the teacher needs to grow into full maturity as a teacher.

Teacher behavior is seldom improved by those who consider their task completed when they have handed out a few pertinent suggestions for improvement. Effective teaching is basically an expression of the total personality of the teacher. Teachers can be modified only by those practices of human relationships which govern the modification of behavior in all human beings.

The Culture Has Given Us The Authoritarian Teacher

Understanding the teacher involves understanding the culture which has helped shape her personality. Many of the problems of teachers arise out of our efforts to move them out of deeply ingrained patterns of cultural behavior without proper consideration for their feelings, attitudes, and perceptions. Many times deeply disturbed teachers have resulted from our impatient efforts.

When we are insistently advocating modern methods, it should be remembered that the American elementary school teacher has lived most of her life in a culture in which the basic pattern of human relationships is in large part authoritarian and paternalistic. When

we examine closely the institutions created and maintained by our culture, we are impressed by the uniformity of this pattern—the paternalistic home, the hierarchical church, the line and staff business organization, the competitive business structure, the schools the teacher attended, and most other institutions the teacher has experienced.

The Culture and Behavior Patterns

Most present-day elementary school teachers have been reared in a society where the individual appears to be of little importance as compared to the impersonal stereotypes. The behavior of people seems to indicate a preference for domination of others rather than faith in the individual to cooperate in enterprises of common concern.

There is little evidence in the human relationships which characterize our business organizations, our employer-employee relationships, our police methods, and our parent-child relationships, which really indicates a deep faith in the principle that people can direct their own lives if freed to do so. Our institutions consistently reward conformity and punish non-conformity.

Teachers growing up in such a culture learn the behavior patterns that are acceptable. They experience deeply the dominance and control of others. They learn early that might (sometimes simply physical size) is right. People who fit into the stereotype and are productive within its highly structured limitations are recognized as important. People who do not are punished.

Science versus Teachers' Feelings

One of the frequently noted person-

ality conflicts of the elementary teacher results from the disagreement of the findings of science with the behavior patterns she has learned. Our institutions shaping personality developed long before we had any deep insight into human motivation, human needs, or growth and development principles.

Cultural patterns are carried in the feelings, perceptions, and experiences of people. The modification of cultural patterns is effected only by inner struggle and conflict within people. The teacher is torn in the process of attempting to accept the findings of science regarding the needs of children, and the feelings and behavior learned from her own experience in a directive, highly structured culture. This struggle seems to be inescapable. In a very real sense, the modern elementary teacher is attempting to live in two cultural worlds.

One world (outside school) is organized to make people conform to a rigid, pseudo-moralistic pattern of autocratic human relations. The other world (inside school) is dedicated to the encouragement of human growth, self-direction, the filling of human needs, and the self-actualization of individuals. The teacher is torn between the two.

In this sense it is important to remember that the elementary school is a unique institution—it doesn't fit the pattern. However desirable we consider our practices in the elementary school to be, they are not the practices of typical American institutions.

Teachers Seek a Solution

The authoritarian

Some elementary school teachers are fearful of the possible results of giving children greater freedom. The appeal

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of the new is overcome by the security of familiar behavior patterns. Such teachers stand rigidly in the old cultural pattern and, in their feelings at least, refuse to budge.

Although this resistance seems to offer them the best solution to their problem, it does not eliminate the conflict. These reluctant teachers are variously referred to as "traditional," "task masters," or "authoritarian" by their colleagues. At times such teachers feel deeply that they are doing their "moral duty" as their feelings dictate. At other times they are overcome by doubt and frustration which they may find impossible to resolve without help.

The split personality

There are teachers who attempt to divide themselves between two cultures. At school they pledge their loyalty to the needs of children, the climate of permissiveness, the acceptance of all. Out of school these teachers sometimes behave on the assumption that the old pattern of frustration and punishment is effective. She may be unable to understand or accept the behavior of her neighbor, merchant, or husband as motivated toward self-realization. She may be the first to recommend punishment as a corrective for the neighbor's adolescent daughter. The teacher's home and school problems are kept carefully separated. She may sense the conflict and be disturbed by it.

The integrated teacher

Again, other elementary teachers may integrate their behavior almost wholly around the new insights into human motivation and behavior. Teachers who have deeply satisfying experi-

ences with children in a situation where children are growing rapidly in self-direction, may seek to apply the principles of democratic human relationships to all areas of their lives.

But even these teachers must meet considerable conflict. They run the risk of being misunderstood by parents and the community. They may become a threat to more highly structured co-workers who adhere to a strict authoritarian rule. Frequently such teachers have differences with principals and others over best methods of teaching. In general, these teachers are a minority group and must suffer the doubts and misgivings concomitant with atypical behavior patterns.

Teacher Loyalties Divided

The confusion, frustration, and emotional conflict in the lives of elementary teachers has increased since the inception of the child-study movement.

- Our culture has long considered play a wasteful and immoral practice. When biological and psychological research pointed up the necessity for free unorganized play and relaxation for children, *it conflicted with our moral duty to protect the child from lazy habits.*
- When we discovered the need for frequent rest periods during the school day, *it conflicted with our moral duty to teach children habits of industry and perseverance.*
- When we discovered the imperative necessity for readiness for learning, *it violated our cultural sense of orderliness and conformity to permit some children to play while others did things we considered work.*

Old Adages Questioned

"Spare the rod and spoil the child."
"The bitter pill is the best medicine."

"Children should be seen and not heard." These were basic premises in many teachers' childhood experiences and they are widely accepted *a priori* truths even yet. When the teacher attempts to practice the "new" education, she runs counter many times to her deepest feelings and "moral" obligations. Fears of spoiling children arise in the feeling of teachers who straddle two cultures.

The fact that the old cultural pattern, with its "frustration-punishment" complex, filled our reformatories, our prisons, and our mental institutions faster than we could build them, does not reduce *at the feeling level* the attachment of the personality to the familiar behavior stereotypes. Culture is an all-pervasive thing and elementary teachers cannot resolve their conflicts at the feeling level without the assurance, help, and understanding of supervisors and other educational leaders.

Supervision Is a Positive Force

Much has been said in the literature on supervisory practices about freeing the teacher. Frequently this is interpreted in the negative sense of simply removing the authoritarian practices of supervision. Although such a program may well eliminate some objectionable practices which frustrate teachers, *effective supervision is a positive force*. The effort to free teachers requires positive action on the part of all educational leadership.

A constructive program for helping teachers to grow to full maturity requires first of all the building of a deep mutual understanding between the leader and the teacher. The supervisor needs to listen to the teacher's prob-

lems, to understand her conflicts, and to build a relationship not of dependency but of mutual respect. This is not quickly done and *the effort to help must, above all else, be sincere*.

Because elementary school teachers are subjected to conflict and many times confused, they reach out readily for sincere help to aid them in clarifying their problems. But help in clarifying ideas cannot be handed down from the lecture platform. In the quiet, person to person, respectful, understanding, accepting relationship, teachers may gain insights into their fears and frustrations, their conflicts and stresses.

Through such supervision teachers may discover their potentialities. They may deepen their insights. They may enrich the quality of their lives in the classroom. They may move forward with renewed hope and greater aspirations. Only through being understood and accepted can teachers learn to understand and accept themselves and the children they guide.

The Goal Is Worthy of the Effort

We need to gain deeper insights into the cultural significance of the modern elementary school program. The elementary school practices which we are encouraging teachers to accept form one of the first institutionally organized efforts of man to put truly democratic human relationships into practice on a scale involving twenty millions of people. Sensitive supervisors can help elementary teachers share in the moral strength which comes from realizing that they are participating in a movement toward a great new humanism.

When we closely examine our program of elementary school education

in contrast to the culture outside the school, we can appreciate the significance of the things we are doing. We are introducing a new way of institutional living based upon human needs, respect for personality, the freedom of the individual for optimum growth, the freedom for self-realization—we are providing psychological living room for the coming generations.

In recent years we have found the child beneath the false doctrines about "human nature." We have discovered the evolving personality of the child beneath the tangle of words, half truths, and fears for his innate sins. The potentialities of the evolving personality of the child have finally been discovered and we are demonstrating that human nature is not evil. We have discovered that love and acceptance are the catalysts of human growth and learning.

During the past twenty years of elementary education, we have tested in practice such basic principles of the democratic way of living as *cooperative action and human relations based upon faith in self-direction*. Studies of authoritarian and democratic group process support our faith in democratic relationships. Investigations of frustration and regression indicate clearly that the free person is the growing person. The psychiatrists working with troubled people have discovered again the deep human need for the individual to realize himself. Recent work in non-directive counseling and play therapy has emphasized the essential importance of freedom and understanding for optimum growth.

Our elementary school program is the forerunner of a new culture based

upon human needs and dedicated to full maturity and human happiness. It is worth our greatest effort!

Teachers Are People, Too

It is generally agreed that behavior is caused and is always goal directed. We accept the premise that personality is acquired in the processes of experience and must be modified through the same processes. We agree in general that feelings toward people are a matter of learned behavior. We are generally agreed that feelings, attitudes, emotional cravings, and organic drives are more important determinants of behavior than critical reflective thinking or ethical suasion. We agree that people are primarily feeling rather than thinking organisms.

Nevertheless, we continue to provide facts before we have learned the perceptions and needs of the teacher to be helped. We recommend procedures before we understand the feelings and attitudes of the teacher. We give advice without understanding the personality who is supposed to carry out our plans.

It is axiomatic that every teacher has her own perceptions, cognitions, feelings, and attitudes toward her job, children, school, and toward herself. No general statement of the problems of teachers can ever apply to all.

Teacher behavior is always oriented to her total perceptive, cognitive environment. All behavior is colored and modified by total past experience. Far reaching changes in human behavior come about by a slow process. Such changes may be facilitated only through understanding the underlying purposes of the person to be changed, accepting the person, and working from the

present as rapidly as deeper insight and motivation permit. Supervisors who would improve teachers will begin by studying the individual teacher.

We Forget the Teacher

The feelings, attitudes, and perceptions of the teacher are treated frequently as unwelcome interlopers, or they are ignored completely. Supervisors usually have imposing lists of the principles governing the learning process, growth and development, mental health, basic human needs, motivation, and teacher-pupil relations.

But often supervisors behave as though these principles apply only to children. We implore the teacher to study the child and forget to study the teacher. We advocate understanding for the child and the necessity for accepting him completely as a primary condition for growth; but we forget that the teacher grows under the same conditions. Until we face the full measure of our task of helping teachers, our efforts may well hinder growth.

Supervisors Must

Put First Things First

In our efforts to speed the process of building the new culture on the basis of human needs, we must not forget that the teacher also possesses life needs and drives to self-realization. The tremendous scientific effort, the philosophical refinement of basic principles, the experimentation with people in school and out during the past twenty years, have indicated clearly the essential behavior required of supervisor as well as teacher.

One person cannot modify the behavior of another person toward

greater growth unless he establishes an intimate rapport, an understanding relationship, and a mutual acceptance with him. Only the person to be changed can modify his own behavior in the last analysis. The teacher becomes a better teacher by verifying in her own experience the soundness of the essential principles of democratic human relationships. Unless the supervisor practices these relationships, the teacher will not learn them from her.

Supervisors may well protest that they do not have time to study and understand the individual teacher's problems. The fundamental question is, *what is most important?* Keeping records, sending out questionnaires, rating teachers, filling out reports, and writing bulletins do not help teachers to grow or improve their quality of living and teaching.

Supervisors who do not have time to understand the teacher will not help her. Better to help one teacher than to do nothing for many. We have long held that the term "class" is an abstraction that obscures the reality of the individual child; the term "teachers" obscures the reality of the individual teacher and her particular problems.

Give Her Room To Grow

Understanding the teacher is the first step toward helping her. The supervisor who puts first things first and sets out to recognize and help the teacher as a fellow human being will have little time to judge and will have her own life enriched in the process.

The teacher needs psychological living room if she is to grow toward full maturity. The supervisor's task is to help her discover it.

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