

Attitudes Affect Pupils' Learning

*Both teacher and pupils
must examine their attitudes
before learning can improve.*

AT THE 1950 White House Conference on Children and Youth, William Heard Kilpatrick made a point with a memorable illustration. In talking about "what do pupils learn?" he referred to the way that most of us were taught to go to church. When we were children we were made to go to church. Whether we wanted to or not, every Sunday, and sometimes oftener we had to dress up and go to a church. It was usually the idea of our parents that if we developed early habits of going to church these habits would stay with us for the rest of our lives.

But did we really learn to go to church? In fact, many of us learned just the opposite. We went to church while we were children because we were forced to, but as soon as we became old enough to have some control over our own behavior we stopped going to

church. For many of us it was not until much later when we had rethought through the whole matter that we determined for ourselves whether or not we would be regular church goers.

As Dr. Kilpatrick said, "A child can be forced to do on the outside because we are bigger and stronger than he is, but for effective learning we must reach the child on the inside." In other words, we must have an effect on his attitudes toward what we teach if we want other techniques of instruction to take effect.

Attitudes Affect What

Kilpatrick's illustration demonstrates the important point that we do not always know what we are teaching. In fact, we may sometimes be teaching the child the opposite from what we think we are getting across to him.

A junior high boy once told his teacher, "Mrs. Jones, I think I could like you if you weren't an English teacher!" What he was really saying was that his attitude toward English was such that he could never like anyone associated with it, and she might as well stop trying to teach him the parts of speech. Many classroom teachers can tell you that they often experience a nagging sensation that they are teaching entirely

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the wrong thing for the pupils who happen to be facing them in the classroom. They would like to throw out the curriculum, the course-work for the day, and, forgetting about external pressures, see what they could do to really reach these youngsters where they live. They have the feeling that their point of entry into the child's world is all wrong, and that as long as they continue on their present track they will get nowhere.

A child's attitude toward subject matter often sets up a process of selective attention. *What* he will learn is determined in part by his readiness to receive.

Attitudes Affect How

One answer to this problem of reaching inside the world of the learner was provided in this Journal just a year ago in an article by Carl Rogers (3). He pointed out the similarity between significant learning and psychotherapy. Learning is facilitated when a pupil is confronted with a situation perceived as a problem. It also helps when the teacher is able to be a real person who is not playing some sort of a role, and who can truly accept and understand the feelings of the pupil. In this situation the teacher provides resources and tools, and he includes himself among the other resources for which the pupil might discover a use. Basic to this idea of teaching is the climate in the classroom which promotes the development of natural tendencies in the pupil.

A follow-up article by Tenenbaum (4) illustrates the intense attitudes for learning which are developed under such circumstances as those described by Rogers. Students tend to work harder than ever before, and experience changes in themselves which they would not have

believed possible. This change in attitude toward learning effects a change in their learning behaviors so that their whole being becomes involved.

Attitudes are thus closely related to motivation. Fortunate is the teacher whose children are positively oriented toward him and his subject matter. He will find them working with greater vigor, learning more, more quickly.

Attitudes Affect Why

Learning is facilitated when a close, positive relationship exists between teacher and pupil. Sometimes this relationship becomes so intense that it resembles the identification phenomenon that brings a boy to emulate characteristics of his father, or a girl to imitate her mother. Pupils who identify with their teacher not only adopt his mannerisms, and speech, and feel a desire to be close to him, they also work hard to follow his directions, to be a good member of his group, and to earn and deserve his praise.

The attitude of a child toward his teacher can also hamper the learning process. If a child hates his teacher, or is irritated by his teacher's voice or some mannerism, he may really be unable to perform at his optimum level. Such instances, usually referred to as a "personality conflict," are distressing to everyone. In spite of such occurrences, teachers do not need to feel that they must woo their pupils and win them over to doing good work by being "friendly." Children react to genuineness in an adult, and pupil polls have repeatedly shown a preference for the teacher who is on the strict side—a good disciplinarian. But where a child's grades begin to fall, the alert teacher can well ask whether a deteriorating teacher-

pupil relationship is the cause. If so, it is often something that can easily be remedied.

What Are Attitudes?

The importance of a child's attitudes toward learning cannot be underestimated. To understand this, one needs to go further and explore the nature of attitudes in general. What is it about an attitude that gives it strength to influence the way a person behaves?

Suppose you rate yourself on the following concepts. Give yourself a rating of 1 if you feel strongly *for* and 5 if you are strongly *against*. If you are neutral, rate yourself 3.

- _____ The NEA
- _____ A communist in the White House
- _____ *Lady Chatterley's Lover*
- _____ Small foreign cars
- _____ Fluoridation
- _____ The Catholic Church
- _____ Jack Paar
- _____ "This Is Your Life"
- _____ Pogo
- _____ A person who cracks his knuckles

It is the items which you marked "5" in which we are interested. As you read the item, did you feel a repugnance? Did you use extra effort and pressure in marking the "5" so that it is blacker than the other ratings? Did your expression change as you read the item?

These and many other reactions may have been elicited by the concepts which you oppose. They indicate an emotional response called *negative valence*, and simply reflect that you bear within yourself the tendency to react against many items which from time to time may arise in your environment. In a like manner, you possess a readiness to respond favorably toward other aspects in your environment (*positive valence*).

These readinesses, or tendencies, influence behavior. Because of them one works to get the things he wants, one votes for and against certain issues, one joins a cause, opposes something, attempts to influence others, and in many ways succumbs to the push and pull of attitudinal valences throughout the day.

The crucial and unique feature of attitudes and the aspect which makes them potent in the learning situation is their emotional component. People generally take a stand for or against Jack Paar or Pogo, for instance, and defend their position with heat and vehemence. A belief which lacks this emotional aspect is something else again—perhaps it may be only an opinion or judgment.

Where emotion is involved, the effect upon learning is going to be intensified. A strong positive valence for a subject will result in the quick amassing of a great deal of material in a short time. On the other hand, as above in the case of the boy and the English teacher, a strong negative valence is going to make learning difficult or impossible until the situation is restructured to bring to the fore some aspect with a positive potential. For instance, if the teacher can show the boy the similarity between the logic in grammar and the logic in an automobile engine, he may get some fun out of diagramming a sentence. Such restructuring is often more readily accomplished than effecting a change in the original attitude itself.

Whose Attitudes?

The child's attitudes are not the only ones that need scrutiny in this issue. Teachers have attitudes that are important to the learning process, as well as parents, communities, and prevailing attitudes in the nation as a whole.

In the impressionable years of childhood one might say that attitudes are catching. Anderson and Brewer (1) found that children placed in nursery school under a dominative teacher showed significantly more dominative and aggressive behavior in the classroom and on the playground than children who were placed under more democratic and permissive (socially integrative) teachers. The following year, if the children were placed with a teacher with different characteristics, it was not long before the children's play took on these new attributes.

Parents are sometimes appalled at their children's attitudes, as reflected in dinner-table conversation, which turn out to be considerably different from their own. In fact, as the child grows older, child-rearing seems to develop largely into an effort to counteract some of these family-alien attitudes picked up by the children from outside the family circle. A constant complaint of parents is, "We'd get along fine if it weren't for the influence of Betty's friends." But one cannot bring up a child in a vacuum. The early family relationships must have been built up strongly enough to withstand the later influences from outside which may occasionally be deemed undesirable.

A very difficult situation exists where a middle-class teacher (which includes most of us) is trying to teach lower-class children. The value system in lower-class homes is so different, the attitudes of children, parents and neighborhood at such variance from those of the middle-class teacher that he often feels he is speaking in a foreign tongue.

Consider his efforts at teaching common courtesy, "please," "thank you," and "excuse me," to children who regard such niceties as affected or snobbish. The

teacher regards books, and their care, with high value; the children are often unused to thinking about them at all! How many boys in manual arts classes make as their first project a book shelf—and take it to a home where there are no books! Teachers regard fighting as a stupid way of settling differences; but many boys would not gain the respect and approval of their own father if they could not hold their own in a street fight.

Even speech patterns are reflected in this class difference. A slum boy, greeted in the morning by his teacher with "Good morning, Robert," refused to answer and threw himself into his seat. Another teacher entered and said, "Hi, Bob," to which he replied with "Hi" and a beaming smile.

Such attitudes toward school, books, teachers, and the learning situation in general are often a reflection of home and neighborhood. I am rather pessimistic about how far any teacher or school can go to effect a positive change in the situation except in the occasional case where a child and a home are atypical for the particular neighborhood culture. For instance, some families are on the move, going up the social scale. A mother or father does not accept the class mores for themselves and their children. Where such an attitude and drive for betterment exists, the teacher can do wonders to help the child get the education he and his family desire.

It is because of the existence of such children that teachers must avoid stereotyping whole groups or classes. Remaining alert for the golden nuggets which exist in almost any group and helping them to achieve a little more polish and shine, educationally speaking, are stimulating and rewarding, and keep many teachers in positions which are otherwise frustrating and dull.

Our country has a long way to go before its national attitudes toward education can compare favorably to those found in the USSR. What would we be able to achieve if it were commonly held that to obtain the highest possible training was a patriotic duty? What would happen to our teacher shortage if the teaching profession were on a par with medicine, and similarly rewarded? What changes would we see in our pupils if we eliminated the concept of individual differences and gave each child the idea and assurance that he could learn all of the material of the basic course of instruction—and then provided the teachers with tools, time, and techniques to assure that the pupils would do so!

These national attitudes prevail in the Soviet Republics. They account in part for the tremendous accomplishments of their educational system in the last 25 years (2). It may be that we must leave to national organizations any program

directed toward effecting a large-scale change in attitudes toward education. The immediate concern within the scope of each individual educator is to look at his own attitudes and those of his pupils so that the classroom atmosphere is such that learning can take place.

References

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Editorial

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in the home for cheapening human life, and an exercise in human de-sensitization.

The men who govern TV cannot have it both ways. They cannot lay claim to fabulous powers in affecting the sale of merchandise yet disclaim responsibility for affecting easy attitudes towards violence. They cannot obtain free from the American people a broadcasting franchise worth billions of dollars yet feel no special responsibility to uphold the public interest.

Of course there are good things on TV. In fact, the good things are getting better. But the bad things are getting worse, and there are many more of them. For every dramatic production like "The Moon and Sixpence" or an information program like

the Friendly-Murrow production on missiles—tributes to the imagination and capability of television—there are dozens of bang-bang Westerns, rock'em-and-sock'em cheapies and brain-beaters.

No one expects television to become a ponderous, bloated, around-the-clock Sunday sermon. But neither do we expect it to be a mammoth school for sadists. One thing is certain. Increasingly, the connection between the superabundance of glamorized violence programs and the mounting national bill for juvenile delinquency and crime in general will become manifest. The resultant outcry and reaction, official and unofficial, will make the clamor over the quiz shows seem like the gentle sounds of straws in the wind.

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