

Let's Begin Where the Teacher Is

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If education is to keep in step with other professions, it is high time that the old wives' tales regarding the qualifications of a good teacher be consigned to oblivion. That this cannot be accomplished overnight is exemplified in this article by Chandos Reid, supervisor, Denver (Colo.) Public Schools, on leave with the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation, Teachers College, Columbia University. Miss Reid cites some of the factors for and against speedy elimination of the impediments to the development of a well-balanced and happy teacher.

"TAKE THE CHILD where he is and help him grow." This plea has a familiar ring to teachers of children. Why not focus a similar plea on the needs of adult personnel in our educational system. "Take the teacher where he is and help him grow."

One can scarcely pick up a magazine, popular or professional, these days without seeing some new suggestion as to what the schools should do. That means, frankly, what the teacher should do. He should meet the needs of all American youth, he should get out into the community, he should help children learn to solve problems, he should integrate the subjects in the curriculum, he should provide for individual differences, he should have different groups of children carrying on different activities or reading different materials at the same time. . . . The list is endless.

No one would deny that these things the teacher should do are highly laudable. Certainly such denial would not be made by teachers who are, in all probability, the most conscientious of the professional workers. It is the tacit assumption of the writers that any teacher willing to try could readily adopt the new practices which he advo-

cates and change his classroom in order to meet the many demands of the times.

Complexity Dogs the Issue

Actually, the problem is not so simple. New behaviors are expected from teachers who are working in the same rooms, with the same equipment, with children of the same age, and with the same associates and administration which elicited their traditional patterns of behavior. Not only is the environment unchanged, but teachers have been happy and successful in this environment for many years. Indeed, many of them elected to be teachers because the routine of the classroom was at least sufficiently pleasant so that they need not seek to escape from it.

When the teacher faces the prospect of acting in a markedly different manner in the schoolroom, he responds according to fairly predictable psychological behaviors:

He may consider the entire situation, his other relationships, the new information presented to him, the possible actions open to him, the effect of these changes on his own personal goals, the attitude of his friends and fellow teachers, his previous training, and after careful consideration of the entire information available, change his existing values

and modes of behavior to meet the new situation.

He may see only the challenge to his existing habits, the reaction of his friends, the values and satisfactions he has found in his own school experience, and reaffirm those values and satisfactions to himself so that he becomes defensive about them.

He may attempt to adopt the new language and appearance of conformity to the new ideas presented, but use them to rationalize what he has always done. This permits him to continue in the old habits and with his old standards of value, but to avoid the discomfort of making any change in his behavior.

He may undertake to accept the newer set of values and may accept them intellectually but be unable to act successfully in terms of the new values. If this occurs, he has a highly unsatisfactory experience. Although he may keep working to reorient his behavior until he achieves a satisfactory adjustment, he may show the aggressive reaction which commonly occurs as a result of frustration.

All of these reactions have been common among teachers who have worked in the newer programs. Some of the adverse reactions occur frequently enough to merit examination in the hope that they can be prevented. So frequently, indeed, that it is time we face the problems which teachers are experiencing as they try to develop new modes of classroom behavior.

Beliefs and Action Are Inseparable

If we are to begin with teachers where they are, we must first of all examine carefully the attitudes and beliefs upon which the faculty of any school is operating. We operate in accordance with many myths to which we would hesitate to do homage, were we conscious of them. Much of the

security of teachers depends upon the common ideas and ideals, and even unvoiced customs which have been developed within a faculty. Consider what must be done about attitudes of teachers, for example, if a school has built the following traditions:

- A good teacher is a stern disciplinarian.
- A good course is a difficult one, and a good teacher makes it hard to pass his course.
- A college preparatory course is better (harder) than non-college preparatory.
- The better teachers learn how to do their work with less time and effort—it is a mark of inefficiency to spend long hours at school.

These examples are only illustrative, but they have been known to exist, and the introduction of new practices without a consideration of such existing myths or others like them leads to antagonisms and misunderstandings within the faculty and greatly increases the insecurity of teachers as they work.

Another illustration of the attitude of many teachers is the belief about discipline. Discipline has traditionally been interpreted as keeping a class quiet and the class situation formalized. Unless a teacher is well trained in informal group procedures and knows what to expect of them, he will find himself in the midst of conflict when he attempts to have an informal situation in his classroom. He will be trying to keep children still and have them express themselves freely at the same time. He will have little basis for determining his success or failure. He will find it more difficult to gain a sense of achievement from a classroom discussion than from a recitation in which material previously specified has been adequately covered.

Frustration and a feeling of ineffectiveness result.

A sense of achievement is basic to security and mental well-being. Yet many of the newer practices provide little sense of accomplishment for teachers. If we are to begin with teachers where they are, we must look to see what they need in order to have a sense of satisfaction in the job they are attempting. The seeming indefiniteness of the newer programs often gives teachers a feeling of inadequacy. Sometimes it is occasioned by the fact that the goals set seem unattainable and that there is no way of measuring progress toward them. At other times the problem seems to stem from the change in emphasis from definite achievement in specific knowledges and skills to behavior changes which require a different form of evaluation. Frequently such evaluation has been overlooked in the program, and the teacher is left unsatisfied.

Preparedness Is a Point

The integration of various fields of work, the new procedures being introduced, and the direction of the program toward the particular needs of the local school community are all trends which necessitate the acquisition of much additional information on the part of teachers. If we are to begin with teachers where they are, we must help them find ways to satisfy the need for:

Broadening their training in more subject fields.

Becoming familiar with and learning how to use a variety of materials.

Learning how to organize activities around problems or centers of interest, as well as according to the logic inherent within subject fields.

Understanding the relationship which various subjects bear to each other.

Understanding the community and the ways in which the school and community can help each other.

Reading widely and participating in experience programs for teachers themselves.

Increasing their understanding of child growth and development.

But even if the teacher has been prepared in this manner, he is often denied the materials for which an appetite has been created. Ready and eager to launch a functional unit of instruction, he finds only the old history book, copyright 1930, with which to work. Too often his sense of difficulty is intensified because the budget for materials has not been increased or the reallocation of textbook funds has not been made so that varieties of materials may be ordered. Materials must keep pace with the thinking of teachers.

Group Approval Needed

The problems of the teacher who is experimenting are intensified by the fact that the new practices do not exist throughout an entire school or school system, but the old and new exist side by side in the same school. In many schools, not only does the teacher who undertakes the new work face his own personal insecurities, but he also faces the varying opinions of members of the faculty who do not approve of what he is doing. Teachers are interested, even as are adolescents, in being well thought of by other teachers, by the administrators, by their college professors, and even by the parents or business men in the community. Status with others is of major importance. Traditionally, such status is the result of com-

petitive success in the achievement of pupils on examinations, in rating by supervisors and principals, and in being chosen to work on special curriculum committees.

When newer programs are based upon the idea of cooperation, the techniques of working together must be studied carefully, and attention must be given to changing the traditional attitudes of prestige, promotion, and competition which prevent effective cooperation. When such attitudes prevail, differences of opinion mean that one person is right, while the other is necessarily wrong. However, when a relative standard of values is accepted, and the exchange of ideas is toward a solution of a problem which is recognized as changing constantly, then difference of ideas is a means of progress toward solution, a method of growth in ideas, rather than an expression of an idea which is right or wrong. This concept is a helpful one for teachers who are working closely together and is an essential of cooperative thinking and planning.

All Must Take Part

Another factor which appears to be important in maintaining the morale of teachers while curriculum is being changed is the way in which the change is initiated. To the extent that changes are natural developments of the teachers' own thinking few insecurities are created. It further appears that if an entire faculty works together in the building of its program, fewer insecurities develop. This may be attributed to the fact that each member of the faculty then sees his work in relation to that of the other members, and that common

problems are attacked and resolved by the group rather than becoming frustrations for the individual. The abruptness of change in many schools has been responsible for much loss of security on the part of the teachers.

In many schools, the newer practices were introduced as an experiment with a small group of teachers in order that they might be tried out carefully before they were extended to the entire school. This appears to be a reasonable procedure, but the results have been disastrous in many schools. Instead of maintaining an experimental attitude toward the program, the selection of a few teachers to carry out the new practices was taken as evidence of the superiority of those teachers and thus became a threat to the status of the rest of the faculty. The resultant criticism from teachers not in the experiment caused the experimenting teachers to abandon their objective point of view and become defensive toward their program, with the result that they became aggressive in their attacks upon the traditional classes.

Any attempt to change practices within a faculty must take into account the status of individuals and groups within the faculty. If all the young teachers, or all the older teachers, or all the men, or all the women, or all the people from a certain bridge club; or only one department within the school were to be singled out to take responsibility for curriculum experimentation, the other groups would become defensive. Care must be taken to consider the various group structures within a faculty and the motivations within those groups. We would use a sociogram to get such a picture of a class group

in order to improve the relationships of children. A similar device might be helpful for considering ways to improve faculty relationships. Groups within the faculty, like any other groups, solidify and become defensive if challenged from the outside. This principle of group action has frequently been violated by schools which were attempting curriculum change. The result of its violation has been division of faculties into opposing vested interest groups which criticise each other vigorously, even though, in some instances, the opposing groups are carrying on programs of great similarity.

The Teacher Is a Person

It would be easy to sum up the foregoing discussion by urging administrators and teachers themselves to remember that teachers are *persons*. They have the same fundamental drives as children and these drives must be provided for in the plans for developing new curriculum and procedures within schools.

Changes in program should, so far as possible, be made in terms of problems which are recognized by the total faculty and with the solution of which the total faculty is concerned.

Changes in school programs should be conceived as a continuous, long-term growth pattern which is the product of the thinking of the teachers and patrons of the school.

It is important for the school program that motivation for change should come from the teachers themselves and that assurance of progress toward the expressed goals of that change be evident.

The teacher's sense of well-being and of his own ability to accomplish the task set for him must be preserved.

Existing relationships within the faculty must be recognized, and proposed changes must be made in such a manner that they do not directly challenge those relationships. Constant effort should be made to keep natural groups and groups which rise through working together from becoming so rigidly defined that their rapport with other groups is impeded.

Close communication among all members of the faculty must be maintained. This communication should be more than verbal. It should include a wide variety of activities, such as experiences in the arts, informal social activities, work on common problems of curriculum and evaluation, and the opportunity to share results of experiences in the classroom.

Let's stop blaming teachers for resisting change and begin to set an environment in which changes can be made without fear of failure, without loss of friends, without loss of direction, and without too many nights a week of either meetings or midnight study. Let's become as "guidance minded" with teachers as we are asking teachers to be with children. Let's begin where the teacher is.

YOUR COOPERATION IS REQUESTED

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