

Teacher Personality in School Relationships

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Two problems in school interrelationships are discussed by Kent A. Zimmerman, M.D., chief, and Elizabeth Lewton, consultant, Mental Health Service, California State Department of Public Health, San Francisco.

IN discussing teacher personality, we wish to stress that we are concerned with what might be called the normal teacher. Remarks in this paper do not refer to overly disturbed individuals nor obviously maladjusted persons, either administrators or teachers. They emphasize certain common ways of reacting rather than attempt to describe a total personality. If such patterns are recognized, both administrator and teacher should find it easier to understand each other and to work together more effectively.

All of us will fit in some degree in the categories used below. We choose this method of approach merely because it gives us a more or less concrete way of describing problems that are present in daily teaching and administration in a school setting.

When we talk about the personality of the teacher we cannot do so as if he were working alone without other people around him. His reactions and problems cannot be understood unless one also brings into the picture the personality of the people, and especially the personalities of administrators, who are there to guide and help him. What we will attempt to do in a very simple way is to discuss interaction of personalities, and again we stress

that we are concerned here with the fairly well adjusted individual.

In growth toward maturity, each person faces certain problems as he reaches various stages of personality development. Beginning with preponderantly dependent relationships in childhood and early youth, the individual normally develops toward independence. This is not a smooth progression, however, as the parent-child relationship is a changing, dynamic interaction, requiring constant readjustment of previous attitudes. Since experiences of this period lay the base for future attitudes toward other adults, its successes and failures, its satisfactions and disappointments, are reflected both in the individual's later problems and in the solutions which he finds.

Where these early experiences have not been entirely satisfactory, the problem of dependence-independence, for example, often persists unsolved into adult life. This means the individual has needs for both dependent and independent relationships which are sometimes in conflict with each other. Frequently this basic conflict remains unrecognized and unimportant unless it is intensified by incidents of later life. Prolonged illness, for instance, in

an adolescent or an adult may make the individual more dependent at a time when he fears dependence.

When, therefore, we pick out various characteristics and describe an individual as dependent or overly independent or overly conscientious, we are but discussing a symptom and we are discussing an individual who is that way at that period of time in his growth. Describing an individual as dependent or overly independent does not mean he is necessarily fixed in this approach. It merely means that when we find one of these aspects emphasized in a teacher's personality we begin to have defined for us the way to work with him so as to be most helpful to him. It does not mean that we first try to change him to the way we think he ought to be. This he must do for himself.

THE DEPENDENT TEACHER

In a school system there will be within the group of teachers some individuals who may be characterized as somewhat over-dependent in their interpersonal relationships. An over-dependent individual might exhibit some of the following characteristics:

- He over-values authority and status, especially in relation to the field of education as a defense against his own uncertainties.
- He hesitates to take responsibility in making changes and often will do so only after obtaining reassurance, which ordinarily would not be necessary, from the principal or administrator.
- He generally has few interests, acquaintances or friends outside of

school and in these few he tends to be completely absorbed. He needs frequent approval and reassurance, especially in relation to program details. The dependent teacher usually seeks extra approval and encouragement. If the administrator withholds this, such a teacher immediately feels rejected or at least suffers an immediate drop in self-esteem through loss of what he feels is administrative approval.

- When such a teacher feels he is not accepted or valued by an administrator, he is apt to fall into another kind of problem, that of playing out a rivalry situation with one or several other teachers he feels are more favored.

- In relation to his classroom pupils, this teacher values conformity and forms close relationships with the more passive pupils in the school. He is usually unable to deal well with rebellious or aggressive pupils. A child who is a problem in the class is usually looked upon by a dependent teacher as a personal failure in his classroom teaching and discipline. His consequent anger at such children for confronting him with the problems they bring interferes greatly with his ability to help these children handle their own problems.

At the same time, a teacher who is somewhat dependent has the following values for the administrator:

- Such teachers are usually dependable.
- They do extra assignments willingly with creativity and enthusiasm if they get recognition.

- They form quick and easy identification with the plans of the administrator and are seldom threatening to him.

- Their staff relationships are usually harmonious and friendly unless, as mentioned before, they feel threatened by rivalry situations.

On the basis of this brief outline of some of the problems of the dependent teacher it may be possible for the administrator to help such an individual in the following ways:

- It is sometimes difficult to get a dependent teacher to accept much initiative. When he does, he will require from the administrator an extra amount of time for encouragement and reassurance. There must go along with this, however, a continued expectation that the teacher will assume his share of responsibility.

- The dependent teacher responds constructively to approval and support. Given these, he usually can find how to help himself. He gains confidence by success and can take increasing responsibility.

- The dependent teacher will run quickly for help in handling classroom pupils, especially the rebellious and aggressive ones. His first tendency is to try to make the principal feel primary responsibility for these problems. The principal's task here is to encourage the teacher to set reasonable limits for the difficult pupils and to see to it that these limits are observed.

- Avoid creating rivalry situations by such an approach as this: "If Miss Jones can do it, why can't you?"

THE OVERLY INDEPENDENT TEACHER

The overly independent teacher is one who is able to integrate himself well with the group, who wants to do a good job, but who at the same time will exhibit some of the following personality facets:

- He is usually abrupt and reacts quickly in a surprised or questioning way to any unexpected change. These individuals often have obvious or hidden capacity for leadership. Their leadership often tends to question authority and emphasizes the fact that they do not like things done to them or for them without consultation. Such individuals at times may form a negative, though loyal, relationship to the principal or administrator. The administrator often feels this reservation and may consider it purely enmity whereas it may really express the effort of the teacher to maintain himself as an adult in the face of authority. From this point of view, the overly independent teacher also has a dependence-independence problem, but his solution ordinarily is to fight rather than to submit.

- When given responsibilities, the independent teacher often rises to the occasion and exhibits qualities of leadership which previously had been unsuspected. Outside school, he usually has a number of friends and interests, often considers himself a liberal, and tends to provide balance in civic affairs to that group in the community which accepts authority and sometimes imposition without question or protest.

In the classroom such a teacher may present some of the following problems to the administrator:

- He may not like, may often despise, passive pupils and often is unable to help them develop toward maturity.
- Sometimes in handling aggressive pupils, the independent teacher, because of his hidden or disguised sympathy with them, is unable to help them meet their problems because he tends to over-identify himself with their aggression and has sympathy with the rebellion exhibited.
- In some instances the rebellious teacher on the other hand may try to suppress rebellion in an aggressive pupil. Exhibition of rebelliousness in a pupil may stir up or reawaken some of the teacher's own feelings of this nature.
- Since this kind of teacher will tend to question fixed routines and red tape, it will be necessary that the administrator be able to accept questioning and resistance. He must see these as possible approaches which these people have found in becoming adjusted to new ideas in the formation of which they have not shared.
- Sometimes the leadership capacities which these individuals exhibit seem threatening to the administrator because of the manner in which they are expressed. If the administrator takes these as attacks on his leadership, he then feels himself in the highly vulnerable position of defending himself against both the contributions and the objections of these teachers.

- The administrator has the task of helping the independent teacher become more interested in the overly passive pupil. He must present the overly passive child as a particular challenge to this kind of teacher.
- The need of this teacher to defend himself against anything resembling dependence frequently prevents him from seeking the administrator's help when such assistance would be appropriate. He will try to handle difficult situations entirely by himself and resent any suggestions that he needs help.
- He sometimes needs steadying if he is to maintain a consistent level of teaching. He often becomes impatient with administrative details, such as attendance records, for example.

The values which the overly independent teacher has for the administrator are as follows:

- He provides a balance to the dependent groups of teachers who too often accept without question the administrator's decisions.
- His resistance to acceptance of autocratic change tends to make the administrator use the democratic process in inviting all to participate in policy formulation and in accomplishment of change.
- Abilities of these individuals as leaders and their ability to grasp the over-all philosophy of a program make them exceedingly valuable when they are given an opportunity to function. They are challenged rather than frightened by large and difficult problems and ordinarily work well with other people.

THE OVERLY CONSCIENTIOUS TEACHER

Overly conscientious teachers exhibit some of the following characteristics:

- They over-value intellectual achievement and consequently reinforce in their students a striving for perfection.
- Their classes are noticeable for a quiet, subdued atmosphere, and they have little awareness of the emotional tension some children may feel in such a setting.
- They tend to enforce administrative policy to the letter and may sometimes embarrass the administrator by carrying the implications too far.
- This often reflects a fear of being vulnerable to criticism in any situation and consequent reliance on rules as a protection.
- Over-conscientious teachers tend to cling together and present a solid resistance against any change which may lead to more flexibility of program or freedom for students.
- They may present a real threat to the administrator by carrying their complaints to the community.
- Their rather self-righteous coldness and inflexibility tend to arouse anxiety in the dependent group and irritation in the overly independent. Thus overly conscientious teachers are a frequent source of more serious conflicts among the teaching personnel.

The positive aspects of these teachers' personalities are:

- They usually have thorough grasp of subject matter, prepare material

carefully and are seldom late or absent.

- Their resistance to change requires careful thinking through and prolonged discussion by the group before radical changes are adopted.
- They are very effective in detailed operations which require care rather than creativity, such as the keeping of attendance records or the financial operation of a cafeteria.

The administrator can help this group make an effective contribution if he avoids making demands which encourage their inclination toward perfection and remembers that they need and respect firm handling. They respond well to a friendly, warm approach, and this is the only method through which they can be helped to recognize and modify their demands on themselves and others. This is particularly true if approval is focused on their efforts to give more understanding and emphasis to human relationships rather than to subject matter and courses of study.

THE ADMINISTRATOR

We shall now discuss the personality of the teacher more specifically in relation to that of the administrator. One study which has been carried out with regard to the selection of young men for a satisfactory career as an executive has revealed that it is advantageous for an administrator to possess the following characteristics:

- He must be an individual who likes achievement.
- He should be a person who has no bothersome problem in relationships between himself and his own parents.

- He should have some ability as a group leader.

The administrator's or principal's relationships with teachers and his ability to accept them and work with them will of course be influenced in varying degree by the above three characteristics.

To be more specific, it might be pointed out how some characteristics of administrators create problems in working with others. Using the categories of dependence and independence, we might draw one illustration. An administrator who is somewhat dependent in his relationships might present to dependent teachers some of the following problems:

- He may wish them at times to take more responsibility than they are capable of assuming. His wish here might be not so much from a desire to make these individuals more independent—which would be a healthy motivation. Rather, he might be motivated by his own disinclination to make decisions.

- His over-dependence on routine and procedure might tend to make the over-conscientious teacher value routine even more highly, so that preservation of procedure would unconsciously be more valued by this teacher than would meeting the needs of the pupils.

- The administrator with more dependence in his makeup tends to place great value on the approval of others. He tends to be guided in his actions more by the securing of such approval than by principles or philosophy in approaching a problem. Therefore he has a tendency to

want others to be like himself. Dependent teachers would feel a pressure to be like the administrator and to have less confidence in being more independent. Approval by the administrator therefore becomes a goal of higher importance than does personal satisfaction arising from teaching success and the teaching relationships with one's own pupils.

For the overly independent teacher and dependent administrator, normal problems of the inter-reaction of their personalities may be some of the following:

- The administrator's dependence on routine makes him less capable of deciding when red tape should be dispensed with and when to take the risks of not using ordinary channels.

- The teacher might come to feel that the administrator does not accept criticism, and he therefore tends to develop reserve and inhibit spontaneity.

- The overly independent teacher may feel a need to test the administrator by showing independence and by giving constructive criticism. If this teacher is not as accepted as the more dependent teachers, he may feel the need to form with others of his kind a clique for mutual support.

Our discussion has centered upon only two aspects of normal personality makeup, the dependence-independence problem and that of over-conscientiousness. These are not the only problems in interrelationships. They have been selected only for purposes of illustration within the confines of a short paper. Personality inter-reaction is

never this simple. There are always other kinds of problems at work too. There is the male-female problem that is another facet of the dependence-independence problem. Sometimes, too, the problem of class or race prejudice is one which is present in a group of teachers, administrators and pupils. In our selection of the dependence-independence and over-conscientious aspects of personality adjustment, we hope merely to illustrate the kind of interplay and balance that occur in the normal working together of various personalities.

How this interplay is handled and worked through between teachers and administrators sets the tone for the way the pupils will be helped in their problems in the classroom. Attitudes are contagious and the tendency by the teacher to work with or against the attitudes of the administrator makes for unconscious patterning and molding of the teacher's attitudes regarding his pupils.

Our suggestion for helping yourself learn more about some of the things we have discussed is simple but nevertheless sometimes difficult to follow. Whenever an administrator in relation to a teacher, or a teacher in relation to his pupil, experiences strong feelings such as anger or over-sympathy, or on the other hand, absence of feeling, this is an indication that he might benefit by discussion of these feelings with someone. Select someone you have trust in. This person does not necessarily have to be an expert; it might be a close friend or an older, experienced

teacher for whom you have respect, but this person should be characterized by the fact that he sees the problem *your* way and not *his* way. He should be a person who can draw you out to find *your* solution. The person who could not help you very much would be one who tends to give a pat answer or to give you *his* solution.

Many of us search instinctively for this kind of help and learn through it. It is one of the best ways to learn from mistakes as well as one of the most efficient ways to avoid them. Quick decisions may not always be made using this method and one's worry and concern over the problem may not be immediately dissolved, but in general better decisions will result with the taking of time for examination of some of these feelings.

If the problem is one in which a number of persons, such as the principal, the teacher, the attendance or guidance worker, the school nurse and the community social worker are involved, get the group together for discussion of the following: What the problem is, who has it, what can be done about it and who should do it. It is our opinion that individual and group discussions constitute one of the most efficient ways to bring about true learning. In such situations the individual learns something about himself and thus makes the knowledge and the facts he has a part of himself. It is this integration of factual knowledge with knowledge about self that seems to be the essence of individual growth and stature.

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