

When Is a Teacher Mature?

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Characteristics of teacher maturity are discussed in this article by Kimball Wiles, chairman, Division of Secondary Education, University of Florida, Gainesville.

RECENT emphasis upon helping pupils become more mature has raised questions about our role as teachers. No concepts are more fundamental than those dealing with maturity. We must constantly examine our behavior to ascertain the degree to which we evidence the qualities which we hope pupils will achieve.

INDICATIONS OF TEACHER MATURITY

A mature person has developed sufficient social skills to provide him a feeling of adequacy in social situations. Much of the shyness and embarrassment felt by some teachers may come from a lack of sufficient practice in basic social skills which would enable them to enjoy living and thinking with others. An unskilled dancer often fails to enjoy the rhythm of the dance because of his need to concentrate on steps. A girl attending her first tea may worry so much about social etiquette that she cannot enjoy the conversation. A teacher with a strong background of information but with so little social poise that he is unable to go to the home of one of his pupils for dinner or to other social affairs is not able to help young people mature socially. Such a teacher will be completely at a loss at a school dance or banquet. Without essential social skills, any person lacks the poise commonly associated with maturity.

A second aspect of maturity is a willingness to accept ourselves as having worth. As we begin to respect our own personalities, we cease imitating other people. As we copy what the "superior" teacher in the next room is doing, we deny the worth of our judgment and of our teaching procedures. When, on the other hand, we begin to make judgments concerning our teaching in terms of the evidence of pupil growth toward desired objectives and then revise our procedures in terms of the evidence, we are behaving as mature persons.

Achieving Self-Direction

Part of the development of maturity is the achieving of self-direction. A mature person does not want always to be told what to do. He wants to work out for himself the best solution. An immature person is likely to be dependent, leaning on someone else for specific directions and information as to steps to be taken. Achievement of a sense of self-direction gives purpose and meaning to life for the individual.

To have self-direction we must be willing to work out solutions to our own problems. This means that one of our basic skills must be an efficient problem solving technique. Unless we have learned to make intelligent decisions, we cannot be mature participants in a democratic society or school.

One of the signs of a mature individual is that he prefers non-directive counseling rather than having someone in authority tell him the exact steps which he must take. An immature person wants someone to whom he can turn to find relief from his problems. As children, we turned to our mothers or fathers when we got into difficulty and expected them to work out the problem for us. As we became more mature, we accepted greater responsibility for solving the difficulties which confronted us. A teacher who always wants the principal to make his decisions for him or who depends on his supervisor for judgments concerning the quality of his teaching is likely to be an immature person.

An essential quality of maturity is a willingness to accept reality. As children, some individuals live much of their time in a dream world made up of the companions they would like to have and of an environmental setting in which they would most like to find themselves. Some individuals continue to insist on looking at the world through rose-colored glasses and on believing that things are the way they want them in their dreams, whether they actually are that way or not.

As teachers, we must accept reality. We must recognize that we cannot have all of the equipment or materials we want; only then can we begin to make most effective use of the materials that are available. An immature teacher is inclined always to place the blame for lack of supplies on the administration or community, while making little or no constructive effort himself to improve the situation. Maturity involves facing the realities of the existing en-

vironment, our own shortcomings, weaknesses and strengths, and working with our full talents to achieve the kinds of reality which we desire.

A teacher shows that he recognizes his needs and shortcomings as he volunteers special skills which he possesses, in order to make up for his lack of ability in other areas. At the same time, he is likely to seek training which will help him overcome these handicaps.

Adjusting to Frustration

Another aspect of maturity is being able to adjust to frustration. This does not mean we must accept complacently the unsatisfactory qualities of our situations, but it does mean we should be willing to take a long-term view and to engage in a lengthy constructive process. Youth is inclined to be impatient. Youth wants to move into the high-salaried bracket very quickly or to bring about a complete social change overnight. As we achieve maturity, however, we recognize that things are likely not to happen that fast and we begin to see the importance of small gains and to use them as ways of achieving the long-term values for which we strive.

Another phase of maturity is that of being capable of taking disappointments without becoming completely discouraged. Here the old quotation, "The man worth while is the man who can smile when everything goes dead wrong," applies. Any child or youth can be happy in a situation in which his slightest wish is fulfilled. A mature person is one who can face disappointment, upset and heartache and still build a world out of the satisfactory features of the situation.

Maturity is characterized also by movement toward a less egocentric world. A baby sees and feels only the things that come into immediate contact with him. A child judges everything by whether it satisfies his immediate desires. Many people remain largely egocentric through a major portion of their lives. A mature person recognizes that the world is not centered around him. He begins to see himself as making a contribution to the group and to the on-going process of civilization. He recognizes that he has a part to play, that he has value as a unique individual, but also he sees the center of emphasis on the social group of which he is a part. As we develop this concept we begin to put ourselves into proper reference to life.

A pre-service teacher, commenting on a teachers' meeting she had attended, said, "The best part of all was the feeling that in my own small way I was able to contribute and to know that people were listening to my questions and comments with sincere interest."

Some teachers are inclined to be *prima donnas*. They are able to do creative work only so long as everything is going their way and everyone praises their efforts. It takes a much more mature person to be able to work cooperatively with the rest of the faculty and to share with others the credit for the program. The immature person usually wants assurance that others always identify him as being the one who has made the greatest contribution and who is the most creative person.

Learning Self-Control

A part of this adjustment to life is learning to control oneself and to ad-

just one's behavior to the situation. A child may lose his temper and engage in extremely anti-social behavior in almost any situation. As we mature we learn to distinguish among kinds of situations and to recognize that some types of behavior are appropriate on one occasion and not on another. Maturing involves learning enough of the social cues to be able to get the insight that makes possible interpretation of various situations and the development of sufficient self-control to abide by the insight that we have.

Our insight in a social situation depends largely upon understanding our own needs and the needs of others. As we mature we work to achieve the type of social relationships that makes it possible for everyone involved in a situation to attain the greatest possible degree of satisfaction of his needs. Viewed in this light, maturity includes understanding of others and ability to get along with others.

Maturity involves working out satisfactory relationships with persons who may have different viewpoints, different religions, different skin color. If we are immature, we tend to be afraid of difference and to insist on staying with persons whose beliefs or backgrounds are similar to ours. We tend also to fear the unknown and we attempt to take steps to insure that we shall not come in contact with persons unlike ourselves. These steps may even involve aggression against persons who are different or the calling of these persons by derogatory names. If we are immature, we may cause social restrictions to be established which prevent development of better understanding. Maturity involves willingness to accept the worth

of other points of view and of other ways of life and willingness to analyze objectively the extent to which different groups can contribute to the attainment of the satisfaction of all.

Developing Consistent Values

A mature person is one who, through objective analysis of his experiences and of the different points of view with which he has come in contact, has conscious values which give purpose, direction and meaning to his living. An immature person accepts the joys or the sorrows of the moment in terms of whether they contribute to his immediate satisfaction. A mature person has a life purpose and uses the experiences of the moment for the fulfillment of that purpose as well as for the satisfactions that come out of the immediate occasion.

A teacher or administrator without a consistent set of values can only make decisions based on expediency. For this reason, other staff members can seldom depend upon him. Recently, a principal was confronted with a problem concerning the type of poster to be used for getting books returned to the library. One teacher objected to the snooping, finger-pointing, accusing, guilt-fixing teacher *vs.* pupil implications of the posters. The principal's reaction was, "I don't see anything wrong with the posters. They get the books back, don't they?" His decision

was made entirely in terms of how well the posters accomplished his desire, not in terms of the learnings the pupils might derive from the experience. He either had not thought through the values he held or he was not using the values to which he gave verbal allegiance as the basis for his decisions.

As far as the individual is concerned, maturity is always in the future. It is something not as yet attained. Through new experiences and new insights, we develop a new picture of what maturity can mean. Although at the age of 25 we may have felt relatively mature, at 35 we may see new possibilities of growth which cause us to look back at our maturation attained at the age of 25 and feel that it represented a very immature stage, indeed, in our life pattern.

The purpose of achieving one step in maturity is to make possible the development of an even greater maturity. We must constantly guard against the feeling that we are completely mature. One individual summarized this well when he said, "Maturity is achieved when we stop thinking we are mature." A teacher grows more mature as long as he continues to recognize that he does not have the final answers about the best methods of teaching or about solutions to world problems. He becomes increasingly mature through humble and intelligent application of the scientific method.

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