

# *Children's Perceptions of School and Teachers*

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A child's learning is directly influenced by the way he feels about his school and his teacher. How can school and home, working together, develop more favorable attitudes on the part of children?

**H**OW do children feel about school as a place to be? How do they perceive teachers? The answers to these questions are of considerable importance to every teacher and supervisor, since the perceptions which children have about school and teachers have significant bearing on quality of learning. Empirical studies tend to support the view that when children feel good about going to school and see their teachers as friendly, helpful adults their emotional, intellectual and social development is greatly facilitated.

The aims of this discussion are to indicate that children's perceptions are the result of many influences at work in their lives and to suggest that it is important for teachers to get evidence about the ways their own youngsters are looking at school and teachers.

## **Looking at School**

Perceptions which children have about school spring from at least two sources: the attitudes held by others in the home and community and the experiences which children actually have within the school.

Parents and other adults build into children expectancies which may hinder or foster desirable school learnings. Many attitudes are learned in very subtle and indirect ways; they are caught, not taught. The kinds of

people parents are, their professed values and actual behavior, and the emotional climate within the home help structure the psychological world of the child.

The parent's own unhappy experiences at school may have left him indifferent to, resentful of or anxiously oversolicitous about school. Parental activities may include little or no concern for the intellectual life, may exclude teachers from social life, may reflect values at great variance with those of the school. Parents thus may unknowingly create unfavorable predispositions toward school as a place to be even before the child has set foot within its doors.

Other more direct negative influences may result from disparaging remarks about teachers as persons or as a group, from references to school as punishment for unacceptable behavior at home.

Fortunately the school has often been creative in modifying unfavorable attitudes. Happy, successful experiences with a good teacher have changed the negative attitudes of many a child.

But not by parents alone can a wholesome view of school be built. Parents and children live in a larger world, the community which by actions and inaction reflects certain attitudes toward school. Irrational attacks on the

school, the shameful underpayment of teachers, exclusion of teachers from the centers of community living, unreasonable expectations that the school assume responsibility for the failures of other social institutions indirectly but relentlessly create a climate wherein children learn attitudes toward school and teachers. While the school represents the ideals and hopes of the community it also reflects community conflicts, failures and instabilities. This is sometimes forgotten by those whose idyllic unrealism views the school as some kind of discontinuous "pure" culture.

The discussion thus far has suggested some of the negative influences which condition the expectancies of children toward school. But in a great majority of American communities the positive influences in this regard outweigh the negative. It is a defensible view that children in the present, to a greater degree than in any previous generation, perceive the school favorably. Nevertheless we can all agree that there is still much room for improvement.

### **Inside the School Community**

The other important source of influence on children's perceptions of school are the experiences they have within the school. For most children these experiences are not an unmixed blessing, for the school, like the home and community, "unconsciously" influences children's perceptions either favorably or unfavorably.

The child's need to see the world in a somewhat organized way leads him to compare school with other sources of satisfaction. For many a youngster the school picture is not a flattering

one. This is revealed in such remarks as, "Do I *have* to go to school?" "Aw nuts! this is the last day of vacation!" All children feel this way occasionally, but too many feel this way too often. If a child views school as contributing in a significant way toward helping him meet life's demands as *he* perceives them he will feel pretty good about school. If he can't make much sense out of school activities and sees the school as irrelevant to his most compelling needs he probably will not feel good about school. And the way he feels will influence enormously the kind and quality of his learning.

It is vitally important for us to realize that the opportunities for learning include not only the deliberate program of the school—what it consciously teaches—but unintentional, unformalized possibilities which grow out of the needs of children and teachers. For example, Johnny comes from a home where he has never achieved a sense of personal worth. At school he sees a teacher and some of his playmates as sources for learning a sense of worthiness. This need may be so great that he responds selectively only to those opportunities which appear to help him meet this need. The school may not even be aware that it is the locus within which Johnny will fail or succeed in his struggle. It is likely, though, that Johnny's later perceptions of school may depend upon the outcome of his efforts to gain an improved sense of selfhood.

As another illustration of the unintentional impact of school probably no teacher has ever deliberately taught dislike of arithmetic or attitudes of scorn toward slow learners yet these

learnings are commonplace in today's schools.

Failure to recognize that children's perceptions and behavior in school are functions of the interplay of many psychological and social forces has at times led schools to take a rather naive view of their roles. On the one hand the school may take credit for learnings of a satisfying sort which occur unintentionally and apart from its deliberate efforts. On the other hand, the school may take blame for consequences of the failures of other people and institutions. This point calls attention to the need for continuous assessment of school purposes, operations and consequences. The schools of today have made tremendous progress in extending the range of deliberate efforts to include many more relevant aspects of children's learning. After all we can work only at the things we know about.

### Children Look at Teachers

Children also bring to school "built in" attitudes toward teachers as persons. These attitudes result from their interactions with significant adults within the home and community. In general children will initially perceive teachers in the ways they have learned to perceive other adults. Thereafter attitudes may be reinforced or modified depending upon the teacher-child relationship which ensues. We must always keep in mind that behavior *in* school is the consequence not only of what happens *in* school but *outside* of school. This applies both to the child and the teacher.

The factors in home and community which shape attitudes toward school apply with similar cogency toward teachers. Since these factors have been

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discussed above the focus here will be upon children's perceptions of teachers within the school situation.

Despite contentions about progressive education the evidence is clear that most children experience teachers and administrators as people who determine what happens in school. Although some schools have been described as child-centered because teachers are responsive to needs of children and provide considerable room for student initiative it is true that most children see school as a place where teachers are in charge. The areas of freedom which exist are defined by teachers. Those who fear that children have taken over the schools will not find much support in children's own perceptions of the situation. Nevertheless in today's schools children have a wider range of initiative and freedom of action than ever before. And all persons committed to the goal of ever expanding development of democratic living will rejoice in this fact even though for most of us our achievements lag behind our aspirations.

Some studies have made clear that many children see teachers as controlling persons who make practically all decisions in school matters. Teachers call the plays, dispense rewards and punishments, define the limits of action and when this is done with humane consideration of the child it is accepted, especially in the early years, without conscious resentment or conflict.

Although observers can describe with

useful objectivity the relative degree of democracy within a school, children will behave in relation to *their* perception of the situation. A small child who perceives his teacher as the source of decisions, initiative and wisdom may not rebel if he perceives this situation as consistent with previous experience at home and in the community. If the authority is benevolent he may feel that this condition is good for him. But if authority at home has been inhumane and has elicited a rebellious response, the school situation likewise may cause feelings or expressions of resentment.

As life conditions change, so, for healthy children, do perceptions of these conditions change. As boys and girls grow the forces within them and the culture outside compel them to seek, and to prize when they find, increasing opportunities for self direction and responsibility. Most children are eager to accept responsibility within their reach and can grow continuously in this regard. The realism of youngsters however leads them to rebel against a responsibility that is thrust upon them for activities which are not relevant or real to them.

Children have ambivalent although

on the whole favorable attitudes toward teachers as persons who are trying in some way to be of help to them. Too many children however do not find responsiveness in their teachers. In some instances the child's need is so great that even excellent teachers cannot fulfill expectations; in many instances deficiencies in teacher personality, knowledge or skills are major obstacles. This is not strange at a time when teacher shortages have led to lowering of standards and where teacher education institutions still focus preparation on intellectual training rather than total personality development.

Attitudes toward school and teachers are learned mainly through interactions with people. School buildings speak, as do curricular materials and teaching procedures, but none so loudly and persuasively as people—teachers, principals, parents, citizens. Their *operating* philosophy will eventually become part of the child's perception of school as a place where he achieves an ever more adequate selfhood, or as a tolerable interlude between the present and a yearned-for maturity, or as a sentence to be served until inexorable time springs the lock.

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### **New York ASCD to Hold Lake Placid Meeting**

The New York State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development will hold its annual conference at the Lake Placid Club on May 9 to 11.

Keynote speaker will be John Mason, President of the Foreign Policy Association. Other major addresses will be presented by Frederick Bair, Administrator of the New York State Fair Employment Practices Act and James Spinning, Superintendent of Schools in Rochester.

J. Cayce Morrison, New York City Director of Education and Adjustment of Puerto Ricans, and formerly Director of Educational Research in the Education Department, will be honored for his extensive service in education.

Eight discussion groups will review topics related to all major areas of teaching, supervision and administration in education.

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