

# Seeing Is Behaving

**The social sciences have been discovering some new ways of looking at human behavior, and these discoveries seem to have vast implications for the whole field of education. Two of these principles are discussed here.**

HOW effective we are in dealing with the great human problems of any generation will depend in large measure upon the accuracy and scope of the ideas we hold about what people are like and why they behave as they do. This is particularly true for what we do as educators. People can only behave in terms of what seems to them to be so. Hence, the methods we use to solve our problems of curriculum will depend upon what we believe about the nature of the people we seek to teach. Whenever, therefore, science changes our ideas of what people are like, it must have far-reaching implications for our profession.

In recent years, the social sciences have been discovering some fascinating and exciting new ways of looking at human behavior, and these discoveries seem to me to have vast implications for the whole field of education. In this article I would like to state just two of these principles and point out some of the things it seems to me they mean for education.

## **Behavior Is a Personal Matter**

The first principle is this: *People do not behave according to the facts as others see them; they behave in terms of what seems to them to be so.* The

psychologist expresses this technically as: Behavior is a function of perception. What affects human behavior, we are beginning to understand, is not so much the forces exerted on people from without as the meanings existing for the individual within. It is feelings, beliefs, convictions, attitudes and understandings of the person who is behaving that constitutes the directing forces of behavior. In an election, for example, people who vote for the Democrats believe that the Democrats will save the nation while the Republicans will certainly ruin it. The reverse is true of the people who vote the other way. Each side behaves in terms of what seems to it to be so. But what is *really* the fact of the matter we shall never know, for only one party gets elected! In order to understand the behavior of people we must understand how things seem to them.

Our failure to understand this simple and "obvious" fact about behavior is one of the most potent causes of misunderstanding and failure in dealing with human problems. A good example may be seen in the case of the child who feels that people do not like him. Feeling that he is unliked and unwanted, the child is likely to make himself obnoxious in his attempts to get the attention of adults who surround him. When company

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comes, for example, he is likely to make a nuisance of himself in his attempts to attract attention. Parents seeking to put a stop to this kind of annoying behavior may say, "For goodness sake, Jimmy, stop annoying Mr. Jones and go to your room!" Such behavior on the part of adults simply serves to prove what the child already believes—"People don't like me very well!"

When we fail to understand how things seem to people with whom we are working, we may make serious errors in our efforts to deal with them. The moment, however, we understand an individual's behavior as it seems to him, our own behavior can be much more accurate, realistic, precise and effective. If a child *thinks* his teacher is unfair, it doesn't make much difference whether the teacher is *really* unfair or not. If a child thinks his teacher is unfair, he behaves as though she were. Whether she is *really* unfair or not is, as the lawyers say, "irrelevant and immaterial information" as far as the child is concerned. In this sense, seeing is not only believing; seeing is behaving! To understand behavior we need to understand the personal meanings existing for the people who are behaving.

### The Effect of the Concept of Self

The second important point we are currently discovering is this: *The most important ideas which affect people's behavior are those ideas they have about themselves.* This, the psychologist refers to as the *self concept*. The beliefs we

hold about ourselves, we are learning, are among the most important determinants of behavior. People who see themselves as men behave like men; people who see themselves as women, behave like women. Our self concepts even affect the things we see and hear. If you don't think so, try going window shopping with a member of the opposite sex.

The self concept, we are finding, is so tremendously important that it affects practically everything we do. We are even discovering that a child's success in school depends in very large measure upon the kind of self concepts he has about himself. Some years ago, Prescott Lecky observed that children often made about the same number of errors in spelling per page when they were writing free material, despite the difficulty of the material. One would normally expect more errors on harder material, but these children spelled as though they were responding to a built-in quota. It occurred to Lecky that they were behaving more in terms of their beliefs about spelling than in terms of their actual skills. Accordingly, he arranged to have a group of these children spend some time with a counselor who helped them to explore themselves and their feelings about their abilities to spell. As a consequence of these discussions an amazing thing happened. Despite the fact that these children had no additional work in spelling whatever, their spelling improved tremendously, and several of the children took up spelling as a hobby!

We are finding a similar phenomenon in the field of reading. Nowadays we catch children's visual difficulties fairly early so that it is rare these days to find a child coming to the reading clinic with anything very wrong with his eyes. More often than not, when a child is un-

able to read, the difficulty seems to lie in the fact that he has developed *an idea about himself* as a person who cannot read. Having developed such an idea, he gets caught in a vicious circle that goes something like this: Believing he cannot read, the child avoids reading and thus avoids the very practice which might make it possible for him to learn. Furthermore, believing that he does not read very well, he reads poorly when asked to do so. His teacher, in turn, observing this weakness, says, "My goodness, Johnny, you don't read very well!" which proves what he already thinks! Once having developed the idea that he cannot read, a child's experience confirms his belief and his teacher's, who should know, corroborates it. Just to make sure that the lesson is well learned, moreover, we may also send home a failing grade on his report card so that his parents can tell him too!

We are beginning to discover that the self concept acts very much like a quota for an individual. What a person believes about himself establishes what he can and will do. Once a self concept is established, furthermore, it is a very difficult thing to change, even if we would like to change it in a positive direction. The young man coming to the university believing that he is not very bright, for example, who is told by the test administrator that he has done very well, responds: "Are you sure? There must be some mistake!"

We are even discovering that the question of adjustment or maladjustment is very largely a question of the self concepts people have about themselves. Well adjusted people, we now observe, are those who see themselves as liked, wanted, acceptable, able—as people of dignity and integrity. People who see themselves so are no trouble to anybody.

They get along fine in our society. They are essentially happy people who work efficiently and effectively, and rarely cause difficulty in school or out. The people who cause us difficulty in our society are, almost without exception, those who see themselves as unliked, unwanted, unacceptable, unable, undignified, unworthy, and the like. These are the frustrated people of our generation who frustrate us. They are the maladjusted, unhappy ones who fill our jails, our mental hospitals and institutions.

#### *Some Implications for Education*

We have now stated two modern principles of behavior:

1. That people behave according to how things seem to them.
2. That the most important ideas any of us ever have are those ideas we hold about ourselves.

These two very simple ideas have vast implications for education. In some ways they corroborate things we educators have been feeling all along. They also raise questions about some of the things we have been doing. And, finally, they seem to point to some new ways of solving old problems. In the remainder of this article I would like to point out two or three of the important implications these ideas seem to have for me.

#### **Education Must Deal with Meanings**

If it is true that behavior is a function of how things seem to people, then education to be effective must deal with people's *meanings*—not just facts. As educators, we have done pretty well in gathering information and in making information available to people. Where we get into difficulty, however, is in helping people to discover the meaning of information in such a way that they will

*behave differently* as a result of the process. When people misbehave it is rarely because they do not know what they should do. Most of us already know a great deal better than we behave. We are like the old farmer who said when they asked him why he wasn't using modern methods, "Heck, I ain't farming now half as well as I know how!"

It is over a failure to understand this problem that we sometimes get into communication difficulties with the public. The public wants the same thing we do. They want kids who *know* something, who *understand* something, but most of all, who *behave* as though they know something. So do we. When the public, however, sees children behaving inadequately, they are likely to assume that the reason they behave so is because they don't *know* any better. But you and I as teachers are aware that this is not the problem. We know that it is very rare that teachers fail because of their lack of knowledge of subject matter. When teachers fail it is almost always because they are unable to bring about the third step we have been talking about—namely, how you get information translated into behavior.

Modern psychology tells us that it is only when knowledge becomes meaning that behavior is affected. If it is meanings that affect human behavior, then it is meanings with which we educators must deal. We will need to concern ourselves with a different kind of facts. We will have to deal with convictions, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, ideas, concepts and understandings. I suspect that we have not always done this in our zeal to "get the facts" from books. Sometimes we have failed to understand that people's behavior is not the result of objective facts, but of *personal* facts, the meaning things have for the behavior

himself. I am afraid we have too often said to the child, "George, I am not interested in what you think; what are the facts?" Small wonder that some children conclude that what goes on in school has nothing to do with life in a meaningful way at all!

Since personal meanings lie inside people, they are not open to direct manipulation. To change meanings we must find effective ways of helping students explore and discover for themselves. We have to let personal meanings become an integral part of the curriculum. Many schools and many teachers have already learned to do this with great skill. We need now to push the movement forward.

#### *Teachers Do Not Have To Be Psychiatrists*

One of the most exciting implications of these new principles is this: if it is true that behavior is a function of perception, then the causes of behavior lie fundamentally in the present and not in the past. Psychologists for several generations have told us that in order to understand an individual we need to know all that has happened to him in the past. As a result many teachers have often felt helpless to deal with a child because for one reason or other they were unable to acquire knowledge of all his past experiences. Many educators have never been entirely happy with this point of view. We have often felt, as Gordon Allport once expressed it, that "people are busy living their lives forward while psychologists busily trace them backwards!" We are now finding that many modern psychologists are providing support for our suspicion that this preoccupation with the past may not always be essential.

If it is true that behavior is a function of perception, then behavior is a result

of how people are perceiving right now, *today, as of this moment!* This understanding opens a whole new world for education. This is not to say that behavior is not *also* the result of what has happened in the past. We can look at the causes of behavior in two ways. A person's behavior is *historically* the result of all the things that have happened to him in the past. It is *immediately* the result of how things seem to him at this moment. For example, a child who has been badly rejected in his youth may come to feel about himself that he is unliked, unwanted, unacceptable, that the world is a pretty tough place, almost too much for what he has to offer. These feelings he has acquired, of course, because of the things that have happened to him. But his behavior today, now, as of this moment, is the result of how he is *feeling* today. This way of looking at behavior opens a whole new frontier for educational practice.

When we believed that behavior was entirely a function of the past, there was, of course, very little we could do. It had all been done. Such a belief leads to preoccupation with the child's history instead of what is going on at the moment. The historical view of causation also encourages the old army game of passing the buck. The college says, "What can you do with youngsters who come so badly prepared from high school?" The high school says, "What can you do for the child who comes to you like this from elementary school?" and the elementary school teachers say, "What can you do with a child from a home like that?" The poor parent in our society is low man on the totem pole. He's stuck with it; he doesn't have anybody he can pass the blame to, except maybe to say, "Well, he gets it from the father's side of the family!"

If we believe that a child's behavior is

solely the result of the forces working upon him, there is very little we can do to help, and we are always able to charge off our failures to other people. If, however, behavior is a function of perception, then there are tremendous things we can do in the present. We can help a person to see differently now, even if we cannot change his past. It means that you and I can help children in school without the necessity of having to change their environments. It means that there is something we can do for *every* child no matter what kind of background he comes from. Although we can rarely do much about the past, there are important things we can do about the present.

This new understanding also lifts a great weight from the teachers' shoulders. It means that we do not have to be social workers or psychiatrists, we can just be teachers! It means we do not have to pry, we do not have to know all about a child's background in order to be able to deal with him effectively. This is not to say that knowledge of his past and of his home situation might not be helpful. It does mean that we *do not have to have it* as an absolute essential. I don't know how you feel about this, but this sets me free to do a lot of things I was never able to do before. This simple idea has already caused revolutions in the field of social work, in psychotherapy and in the field of human relations. It seems equally promising in what it may offer to education.

For one thing, teachers do not have to feel defeated. If behavior is a function of perception, then no matter what goes on elsewhere in the child's life, it is still important what you and I do as teachers. People get their perceptions from those who surround them, and that means us. It may be that there are some children with whom we have to deal who are so

sick that we cannot make *all* the difference. We may not be able to change a child completely, but neither are we helpless. Fritz Redl once said in a speech, "You know, the difference between a good child and a naughty child is not very great. The difference, however, between a naughty child and a real tough delinquent is a very great distance. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could just keep them naughty?" I find this sentiment very reassuring. I think that what Redl is trying to tell us is that none of us need feel defeated. That whatever we do is *always* important even though for a particular child it may not be enough to produce immediate results.

Finally, if the self concept is as important as modern psychology tells us, this fact has vast importance for curriculum construction and design. One of the great tragedies of our time is that we have literally hundreds of thousands of people in our society who are the prisoners of their own perceptions. Believing they can only do *x* well, they only do *x* much. The rest of us, seeing them do only *x* much, say, "Well, that's an *x* much person," and this just proves what these people have thought in the first place! Such people are the victims of their own self concepts. Everyone loses as a result of this great waste of human potential.

But people get their self concepts from the ways they have been treated by the persons who surround them during their growing up. From the minute the child is born we begin to teach him who he is and what he is. Whether we are helpful, or hindering, or of no account at all in the development of children's self concepts will depend upon ourselves. We *can* behave in ways that don't count, ways that have nothing to do with meanings, and they will quickly disregard us. Or, we *can* behave in ways that are im-

portant in helping them discover who they are and what they are—in positive fashion. We are, in a sense, the architects of children's self concepts.

Society needs adequate, well adjusted, informed people as never before in history. What then shall we do to develop these kinds of people? I think the answer lies in the above definitions of the kinds of people we want. Earlier in this article we stated that whether or not an individual was likely to be well adjusted, was largely a matter of his self concept. We observed that people who see themselves as liked, wanted, acceptable, able, dignified, worthy, etc., are the kinds who make effective, efficient citizens. People, on the other hand, who see themselves as unliked, unwanted, unacceptable, unable—these kinds of people are the ones who cause us trouble. If this is true, we do not have to be psychiatrists to help children grow.

To be effective in these terms, we need teachers who can understand and perceive how a child is thinking and feeling. We need teachers who can understand the impact of the ways they are behaving and the things they are doing on the perceptions of children. We need teachers skilled in helping children explore and discover themselves and their relationship to the world in which they live. In the final analysis, the question of curriculum construction boils down to this: How can a child feel liked, unless somebody likes him? How can a child feel wanted, unless somebody wants him? How can a child feel acceptable, unless somebody accepts him? And how can a child feel able, unless somewhere he has some success? In our answers to these questions related to the kinds of self concepts we seek lie the basic criteria for curriculum change and improvement.

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