

Teacher Use of Directive Language

Often thinly disguised is the "anonymous authority" in the language used by teachers and parents in their work with children and young people.

TEACHERS today are probably more polite with children than formerly. They may be, however, just as authoritarian and directive as were teachers of earlier years. This article deals with language habits which serve to disguise this authoritarianism while permitting it to continue.

The literature of education provides various methodologies for producing thinking people. Diligent teachers try to get learners to assume increasing responsibility for their own learning and thinking as they move through the schools. Yet in spite of pedagogical treatises and efforts of teachers, complaints are heard at all levels of education that teachers are, in some way, missing in their efforts and are not achieving the results they would like to think they are. One reason may be that in verbal interactions with children and youth teachers are stifling thinking behavior without realizing that they are doing so. It is the contention of

the writer that language habits which stifle thinking behavior and discourage it can be noted in classrooms and homes.

During childhood and adolescence, for example, one standard kind of action taken by a teacher is the use of directive language disguised in the form of a question. This question form is misleading since, normally, no question is being asked of a child. When an adult uses this type of question, agreement is called for rather than thinking, though, on the surface, it would appear that thinking behavior is actually called for.

A parent wants a child to pick up toys when the youngster has finished playing with them.

Parent: Don't you think it would be a good idea to pick up your toys now?

Note that the parent's remark is prefaced with *don't you think*. The child soon learns that this is a literal admonition not to think and that it actually embodies a command. The important point is that the question which is asked does not call for thinking. There is no quarrel here with the merit involved in teaching children to assume responsibility for

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picking up toys. The language in which the command is couched is the culprit.

A parent has made a decision and the verbal interaction involved includes another command in question form as, "Isn't it time to go to bed now?" No call for thinking on the part of the child is seen here. If it should be raining and mother wants to be certain that her child wears his rubbers, she normally requests that he do so by saying, "Shouldn't you wear your rubbers today?" Here again a command or reminder is issued, advice is being given. Thinking behavior is not called for.

Repetitions of this mode of questioning throughout the formative years teaches children that thinking behavior is not called for when questions involving "don't you think," "isn't it," "shouldn't it," "wouldn't it" and the like are used by the socializer. It is possible that teachers themselves have been so well taught throughout their own formative years that they have internalized this kind of directive language and consequently employ it continually.

Directive Language in Schools

Examination of the behavior of teachers in classroom situations proves useful. "Don't you think" is a common preface to remarks and questions used by teachers at all levels. When first graders are challenged with this type of phrase in discussion situations the results are predictable.

A discussion is being held in a first grade to determine what is to be done about procuring the weekly supply of juice which this school normally provides for a mid-morning break. The teacher leads this discussion.

Teacher: Now we must decide who will go downtown to buy the juice this week. Let's think about what we have to do and

try to figure out the best solution to this problem. Now, what do you think?

Jimmy: John and I went down to get it last week and we know how to do it so we ought to do it again.

Susan: Yes, let them do it again.

Teacher: Don't you think it is much nicer to take turns?

In verbal situations of this type the teacher has predetermined the solution to the problem confronting the learners. He does not provide practice in thinking for his learners. It is possible to predict the response normally obtained from children. Six year olds have learned well what "don't you think" means prior to coming to school and they watch carefully for whatever it is they are being told is best. Some may accept what teacher feels is best, grudgingly, at first, but steady employment of this type of language and the observation of what happens after its employment teaches its lesson. The consequence is compliance and acceptance of whatever idea may be in the teacher's mind, disguised, however flimsily, in the phrase, "don't you think."

Older learners exhibit similar responses to this type of admonition.

Fifth graders have read and are discussing an article in the weekly newspaper. The article involved a decision made by some nations to limit the activity of ship weather stations.

Teacher: Why do you suppose the U. S. wanted to discontinue them? Don't you think it costs money?

These children had read the article. No thinking was called for when "don't you think" was used. The teacher actually gave them a vital bit of information which they ought to have been encouraged to think through for themselves. Teachers make this same type of mistake continually in leading discussions.

Rarely do fifth graders react negatively and disagree with the teacher. A child now and then will undoubtedly do so, but, by and large, children by the fifth grade have settled down comfortably when dealing with teachers. They seem quite happy to have teachers do their thinking for them in the classroom, indeed, expect it. There is ample evidence that individuals in a state of dependency quickly learn to respond appropriately to the verbal cues of the person on whom they must depend (1).

At this point the reader is undoubtedly thinking that the case is overdrawn, that the use of this type of phrase is not completely harmful. Given certain circumstances "don't you think" might prove useful for stimulating thinking. If a teacher has built a classroom atmosphere where children feel comfortable and free to challenge, without fear of reprisal, this phrase can be used without the results suggested above. A teacher can say "don't you think" when he is deliberately playing the devil's advocate in an effort to provoke thinking by deliberately misstating something. It has been the writer's experience in many classrooms that this kind of setting is rare indeed.

Other types of language habits merit scrutiny. One cluster of phrases, utilized by many teachers, might be categorized as indirect commands. For example, "*Wouldn't you like to do this? Wouldn't this group like to do the mural this way? Isn't this a good way to handle this kind of work? That was a good story wasn't it? Those are clean desks aren't they? This is a neat paper isn't it? It will work better if you do it that way won't it?*"

It is doubtful that children will be stimulated to think for themselves in verbal interaction situations of this type. Children have learned so well to listen for cues as to appropriate thinking be-

havior that they simply listen and provide the response that the query calls for. The skeptic may suggest that, after all, the end, that of providing helpful suggestions for young inexperienced learners, justifies using any means for furthering learner growth. Certainly the teacher must play the role of the more experienced helpful adult. The writer submits that the teacher using indirect commands merely solicits agreement. The teacher himself has done whatever thinking a situation calls for. Learners very quickly assess the situation in which they find themselves and are usually willing to rely on teacher suggestions offered in this fashion.

Another series of language habits has been noted in classrooms. Children are asked to do something or to think about something. The requests are couched in language which suggests that children profit by pleasing the teacher—if taken literally. Primary grade teachers seem particularly prone to have used this type of language for so long that it is habitual with them. "Will someone tell me? Will someone show me? Give me the answer to this question. Read this for me, etc."

This type of language aims at stimulating thinking and promoting learning, but learners discover that one exerts one's self primarily to please the teacher. If it is assumed that children should learn to do what needs doing in order to help themselves profit, to help themselves learn to assume more and more responsibility for independent thinking action, the use of language with *me* as the focus hardly serves that purpose.

Primary grade children are particularly easy to handle in this fashion since they are anxious to please the teacher and since the teacher as parent surrogate looms large on their horizons. Young

children need to learn to do things for themselves, to learn for their own interests, not for the teacher's. It ought to be obvious that early stress on thinking and doing to please the teacher does not contribute to meeting this need.

One potentially dangerous language habit noted in the behavior of many teachers can be seen when pupil opinion and thinking is to be solicited. During a discussion the teacher wishes to probe pupil opinion and feeling. He asks, "What do you think about this?" or "How do you feel about this?" The usual procedure followed by learners is that of trying to recall the cues provided by the teacher earlier in the discussion situation. What seems called for, as dictated by earlier comments of the teacher, is provided. Thinking cannot normally be said to be stimulated. The condition which must obtain if thinking is to be stimulated using the above language is simple to note. This type of language behavior can be most useful, given a classroom setting and an atmosphere where the usual procedure has been to probe pupil feelings and thoughts, and where the teacher has calmly accepted and seriously considered ideas contrary to his own. As noted in research, however, this is rarely the case when teachers ask for pupil thinking and feelings (2).

Can Teachers Be Helped?

Observation and testimony of hundreds of teachers suggest that teachers are not generally aware of the significance of language habits such as those explored in this article. It is the writer's experience that once selected teachers are made aware of their habits and the potential effects of these on learners they find it relatively easy to learn to avoid this type of directive language. Teachers

can learn to avoid directive language provided they understand and accept the philosophy involved in stimulating independent thinking. Some teachers have helped themselves by inviting other teachers to sit in and check on the occurrence of such phrases as those explored in this article. A simple checklist can be constructed for this purpose. Sensitizing one's self to listen as one talks seems to aid in the gradual elimination of such directive language.

Acquainting teachers with recent pertinent thinking also may help. Fromm, in a recent article, points to the change in the nature of authority in our society. Overt authority, he suggests, has become anonymous authority with the language of the authority figure changed to incorporate the types of language habits discussed here. The consequence for learners is clearly the stifling of thinking and the inculcation of a willingness to wait to be told what to think (3).

A recent research effort by Henry with elementary school children and teachers points to the same kind of conclusion noted above. This study emphasizes that teachers do well in cultivating a docile and acquiescent mode of behavior in the children they teach. The directive language they use can be noted as an important determinant (4).

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