

Can Teachers Encourage Creative Thinking?

Only if their values support creativeness.

"I was thrilled to think we had finally hit on a subject of interest to him."

"She's just a problem child and no matter what you do, it doesn't help."

"I was very interested in his ideas and encouraged the others to contribute."

"Ridiculous for children in second grade."

"This showed thinking on the students' part. They were not ready to accept someone else's ideas until more information was obtained."

"Our schedule is so full already."

"I passed no comment. I listened."

"I was just plain mad, mad, mad."

THESE pairs of contrasting statements were some of the comments made by teachers who were asked to write down what happened when they attempted to apply five principles for rewarding creative thinking in children. One hundred and fourteen teachers of children in public and private schools in 14 states recorded their experiences on questionnaires sent them by the University of Minnesota's Bureau of Educational Research. They were asked "to seek systematically and consciously to apply in a reasonable and appropriate way" the following principles:

1. Treat questions with respect.
2. Treat imaginative ideas with respect.
3. Show your pupils that their ideas have value.

4. Occasionally have pupils do something "for practice" without the threat of evaluation.

5. Tie in evaluation with causes and consequences.

Many of the teachers showed a thorough understanding of the principles by the manner in which they reported anecdotes illustrating their application. For example, a second grade teacher related the following incident in response to the invitation to describe an occasion when she was able to communicate to one of her pupils that his ideas had value:

1. What was the occasion which provided the opportunity to show a pupil that his ideas are valuable? Who was the child? What did he do? How did he seem to feel about his idea(s)?

Science—Incident: Studying about the sun and how it affects the earth.

Student's idea: "Some people must sleep while we are awake."

He examined the globe which was at his disposal to see which countries were actually having day. A large flashlight was also used to give half of the earth a shadow.

This same child went on with his intense

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interest to make a picture of the solar system to show the relation of the sun to the earth and the other planets.

2. What did you do to try to show him that his ideas are of value?

Set up a display letting him help to show the entire class how he had arrived at his conclusion.

Then a bulletin board was made with a huge sun and earth made by the class committees which were chosen. People who were awake were made and cut out, then placed on the board.

3. How did he react to what you did (immediate and/or long-range)?

Created a more intense interest toward the study of heavenly bodies and how they are affected by the sun.

He is now more aware of how space can affect us.

4. What was the reaction of the class, if observable?

Enthusiasm about and a very intense interest in what was being studied. Some were even beginning to display some small ideas which they wanted to develop further.

A mural was also drawn as a result of this type of study in science.

The response of the second grade pupils to their teacher's attitude of respect and encouragement was characteristic of the way youngsters of all ages were reported to have reacted when their teachers applied one of the principles.

On the other hand, quite a few teachers showed an inability either to interpret the meaning of a principle correctly or to cite an appropriate instance of its application. Contrast this report by another second grade teacher of the ideas-have-value principle with the preceding one.

1. What was the occasion which provided the opportunity to show a pupil that his ideas are valuable? Who was the child? What did he do? How did he seem to feel about his idea(s)?

Little Jane who has a great many problems in class and few friends. She has a very poor family life as well as poor living qualities. She went to the grocery store and took a bag of candy and then came back to the class and told them, "If you will let me play I will give you some candy."

2. What did you do to try to show him that his ideas are of value?

I wanted to know where she got the candy, and she began to cry. I then tried to tell her that giving things does not win friends. The class all then participated and said that giving of nice things means you want to be friendly but that Jane should try to get along with them and then we'd all help her.

3. How did he react to what you did (immediate and/or long-range)?

I don't think that it did too much. It's just a problem child and no matter what you do it doesn't (sic) help.

4. What was the reaction of the class, if observable?

They were sincere and wanted to help her but it just didn't work.

A fourth grade teacher gave this anecdote as an illustration of the principle that imaginative ideas should be treated with respect. The superficial treatment accorded the questions was typical of the way many teachers from schools whose faculties participated *en masse* fulfilled their assignments.

1. What was the idea, who expressed it, and what were the general conditions under which the idea was suggested?

Wanted to play "rough" games while skating (ice). Don wanted to play high-jump.

2. What was your immediate reaction to the idea?

Asked if others thought it was safe.

3. What was the immediate reaction of the class, if observable?

Not safe.

4. In what way was respect shown for the idea?

Thought of other games we could play that would not be dangerous.

5. What, if any, were the observable effects (immediate and/or long-range)?

(No answer given.)

Many of the reports were indeed puzzling. In relating incidents in which they were supposed to have shown respect for children's questions and ideas, teachers told of their own evasive or derisive behavior.

Asked when they had been reassuring and accepting, they recited occasions when they had rebuffed their pupils. It is unlikely, however, that any of the teachers wanted to refute the principles which they had been urged to apply consciously in their classrooms—a discouragingly large number simply were unable to incorporate the principles into their teaching.

The Forces Within

A majority of the incidents reported were faithful to the philosophy from which the five principles derive, and many contained important insights about teacher-pupil relationships. Nevertheless, those incidents which had little to do with the principles were perhaps more significant because they provided clues concerning *the forces within teachers which oppose innovation*. The increasing number of individuals and agencies whose aspirations include a complete or partial transformation of American education should look rather carefully into the motives of the teachers who must bring about their hoped-for changes.

The occurrence of a misinterpretation of one of the principles was taken seri-

ously for two reasons. First, out of the innumerable interactions which took place between the teachers and their pupils during the two or three months when they were asked to be alert to opportunities to apply the principles, the teachers decided upon the incidents which were submitted. We can assume, therefore, that these incidents were either memorable or convenient when the teachers sat down to make their reports. Nearly all of the reports were candid and free from embellishment. Accordingly, the incidents cited were, in some ways, reflective of the values and attitudes of the teachers. Second, if a teacher does not prize creative thinking, it is difficult for him to cite examples of his encouraging children to express their individuality.¹

Our guess is that the teachers who were unable to accept one or more of the five principles were prevented from doing so because of their predispositions or temperaments. It is difficult to imagine a classroom which could not offer an abundance of opportunities for the teacher to show respect for his pupils' questions and ideas, or for him to allow them to practice skills without being formally evaluated. Nevertheless, to be aware of such opportunities the teacher must be familiar enough with them to be able to identify them. Furthermore, even though the teacher possesses knowledge of the kinds of situations which can pro-

¹The reader may test the truth of this statement by asking several teachers to recall recent occasions when they encouraged their pupils to explore on their own, to experiment on their own, to hypothesize about their experiences, or to become more sensitive to their surroundings. Teachers whose teaching philosophy is goal-oriented or student-oriented will have no trouble in recounting many instances when they supported or instigated these activities. There will be other teachers, perhaps, who will be unable to cite more than one or two occasions when they actually fostered creative thinking and doing.

vide him with opportunities to show respect for creative thinking, he must be alert to the occurrence of these situations, which means he must be receptive to the ideas which define the situations. There are a number of personality traits which daily prevent teachers from being receptive to theories about encouraging young people to be imaginative or to trust in themselves, and these traits are closely associated with the values which many teachers have.

Applying Supporting Principles

At least ten characteristics were found to be present among the teachers who could not apply one or more of the accepting, supporting principles. Collectively they were authoritarian, defensive,² dominated by time, insensitive to their pupils' intellectual and emotional needs, lacking in energy, preoccupied with their information-giving functions, intellectually inert, disinterested in promoting initiative and self-reliance in their pupils, preoccupied with disciplinary matters, and unwilling to give much of themselves in the teaching-learning compact.³

The reports also revealed that, as a

² Robert M. Roth's definition of defensiveness may partially explain why some of the teachers unconsciously resisted the five principles: "Defensiveness has been defined as an attempt to maintain a concept of self. . . . The anticipation of an experience contrary to this tends to make the individual more adamant in his conception and hence more unrealistic." *Journal of Experimental Education* Vol. 27, No. 4; 1959. p. 275.

³ "Resistance to change" is not listed among the personality characteristics of the rejecting teachers because it was not evident from the reports received that they were any more opposed to change than the teachers who apparently accepted the principles. However, it seems logical to suppose that they were in fact more conservative than the accepting teachers.

group, the teachers who could not accept the principles which were advocated placed a high value on the following concepts: time (but not timeliness), orderliness (but not necessarily logical thinking), respect for authority (but not respect for the potentialities of the individual), the child's responsibility to the group and to the teacher (but not especially the teacher's responsibility to the child or the group's responsibility to the child), the preservation of their self-image (but not the enhancement of their pupils' self-image), and the importance of information (but not the importance of information-getting skills).

Inasmuch as the impact of values upon the curriculum was the theme of the May 1961 issue of *Educational Leadership*, it is perhaps not necessary to echo here that which was so well expressed by Professor Wirth and others. Nevertheless, it is next to impossible to pay too much attention to our values in education, particularly during times such as these, when values are changing perceptibly. Ruth A. Willard's statement shows clearly why values must always be our major concern: ". . . whatever values are dominant for an individual at any one time determine his beliefs and actions and direct the use of his energies, skills and abilities."⁴

Actually, the only message which comes in loud and clear from these reports of incidents of rewarding creative thinking is that when we ask teachers to behave in certain ways we must take their values into consideration. We have devoted a tremendous amount of thought and energy to trying to understand the learner; it is time we begin, with as much care, to examine the teacher.

⁴ *Journal of Educational Research* 29:46; 1955.

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