

## Teacher Perception and Working Climate

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SIGNIFICANT in the history of public education in the United States is the evolutionary development in the working relationships of the classroom teacher and those persons with supervisory responsibilities. This development can be studied in four major divisions: (a) lay supervision of the colonial period, (b) inspection by principals and superintendents of the nineteenth century, (c) the scientific movement of the early twentieth century, and (d) the present period of democratic supervision.

Discussing in any detail these changes in the supervisor-teacher relationship is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that, prior to the present century, the supervisor was charged with the responsibility of classroom inspection. The twentieth century has seen the development of supervision as the improvement of instruction. The thesis of this article is that the climate in which teachers function plays a part as a behavioral determinant. Also the types of concerns and ways of working of teachers are of utmost importance in the teaching process.

Supervisory activities during the first quarter of the present century were cen-

tered in the classroom with the spotlight on the teacher. It was an accepted assumption that when the teacher was not reaching his fullest potential in performance, it was a responsibility of the supervisory personnel to diagnose the weaknesses and to prescribe "treatment" which would result in greater efficiency in the classroom. This concept of the supervisor-teacher relationship was lacking in one very important aspect. Spears (9) states the failure in this way, "It was discovered that somebody had ignored the personal factor—the human equation." The teacher had become the instrument whereby instructional techniques, designated as proper by the supervisor, were to be used in the teaching process.

At present, supervision is deeply concerned with human relationships. No longer is there a general feeling of a superior-subordinate relationship; rather, there is a growing desire and expectation for truly democratic, cooperative action. With such a relationship existing, it is respectable for teachers to admit that they have problems. This, however, in no wise labels one as an inferior, or as an incompetent teacher. This philosophy

of supervision develops as the realization grows that

. . . the teacher is the key figure in the process of guiding children in their experiences. . . . The quality of these experiences rests largely on the kind of person the teacher is. His background, his insights, his sensitivity, and his effectiveness determine to a great extent the caliber of the work accomplished in the school.(8)

### Perceptual Change and Behavior

All school personnel, and particularly supervisors, have a responsibility for helping foster the personal and professional growth of teachers. It is now being realized more forcefully that changes in traditional methods of teaching, where the subject matter is the focus of attention and children function in a passive role, will be accomplished only with changes in these teachers using such methods. Mere acquisition of knowledge, however, is insufficient for behavioral change to occur. The major task is to help teachers change their behavior after having acquired new information. Such behavioral change occurs only as the person's meanings or perceptions change.

Before teachers can change their methods of teaching and how they feel about the types of problems which are of importance to them they must change their attitudes about themselves. Writers in perceptual psychology, such as Combs and Snygg and Kelley, emphasize that people feel about themselves as they do as a result of their past experiences—because of the ways they have been treated by people who are important to them. People come to satisfy Combs' (3) definition of truly adequate persons (a positive view of self, identification with others, openness to experience and

acceptance, and a rich and available perceptual field), by being treated as though they are such people, not by being told they are.

What then are the person-to-person relationships which will help to develop truly adequate persons? The following is Rogers' (7) succinct statement of his beliefs as to those necessary relationships and their results:

If I can create a relationship characterized on my part: (a) by a genuineness of transparency in which I am my own real feelings; (b) by a warm acceptance of and a genuine liking for the other person as a completely separate individual; and (c) by a sensitive ability to see his world and himself as he sees them;

Then the other individual in the relationship: (a) will experience and understand aspects of himself which previously he repressed; (b) will find himself becoming better integrated, more able to function effectively; (c) will become more self-directing and self-confident; (d) will become more of a person, more unique and more self-expressive; and (e) will be able to deal with the problems of life more adequately and more comfortably.

Bills (2) describes these people as those who are more open to their experience.

Emmerling (4) concluded from his study that teachers with the above characteristics will be concerned with problems which are positive, central, self-related, and related to the future. Because of this type of problems orientation, they will be more effective in providing a learner-centered instructional climate in the classroom. Thelen (11) reports research by Withall and Flanders concerning learner-centered and teacher-

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centered classroom climates. The delayed recall of students in the learner-centered classroom was considerably greater than the recall of those in the teacher-centered climate. Also during the learner-centered period the number of positive feelings was greater than the number of negative feelings as reported by about 80 percent of the pupils. These findings add strength to the assumptions of these researchers and to the beliefs of most educators, that what the teacher does in the classroom and how he goes about doing it make a difference. Emmerling asserts as a result of his study that the teacher who provides a learner-centered climate is the truly "good" teacher.

### Studies in Group Relations

The relationships which Rogers describes as conducive to perceptual change have been widely used in client-centered, individual psychotherapy. In recent years the possibility of applying this essentially therapeutic approach in group situations has been suggested. What would be the effect upon a group of teachers if they were allowed to function in an atmosphere in which they would feel free to express their feelings of dissatisfaction as well as satisfaction? How would teachers be affected by being able to participate in educational activities which were designed to facilitate the optimal self-direction of the participants?

To the extent that we can rely upon the expressions of individuals as accurate indications of their true perceptions, some recent research offers partial answers to these questions.

Benson (1) describes a guidance workshop in which teachers participated during a summer school session. The workshop was designed with an attempt

to create an "unthreatening and free" atmosphere for the participants. At the conclusion of the activity it was recommended that other group-centered workshops be conducted which emphasize a permissive atmosphere since all participants in the activity were influenced to make positive change to some degree. Both a study by Engle (5) and the research by Emmerling lend support to this recommendation.<sup>1</sup>

Moore (6) reports on work by James C. Lafferty of the Wayne County, Michigan, Schools, who conducted a study of teacher personality. This study of the improvement in teachers' mental health after participating in a consulting program was carried on during a school year. The teachers were divided into small groups organized for discussion and self-study. In the experimental groups, the teachers who had set an unobtainable goal for themselves reported less guilt feelings about not achieving the goal than did members of the control groups. The experimental group members often described themselves as more assertive, confident and self-respecting. Teachers not participating in the consulting program seemed more dependent, submissive and timid.

There is evidence from these and countless other studies that individuals can be helped to become more adequate people. A concerted attempt is being made to discover the types of activities in which teachers may participate which will help them to become truly adequate individuals. However, in a majority of the studies reported, the actual school

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of relationships between the self report and the self concept, the reader is referred to Arthur W. Combs and Daniel W. Soper, "The Self, Its Derivative Terms, and Research," *Journal of Individual Psychology* 13: 134-45; November 1957.

situations in which all teachers function day after day have not been examined for the relationships among staff members that would be conducive to personal growth. The apparent need for this type of research prompted the writer to attempt the study described in the following paragraphs.

### Faculty Self-Study

The study involved the faculties of six high schools in Florida. The three faculties which comprised the experimental group participated in a year-long program of study of their schools during the 1961-62 school year. This self-study was conducted as a preliminary activity in preparation for reevaluation of the schools involved by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. Consultative help was given to these faculties by Professors of Education from two of the state universities.

A study of the type outlined in *The Evaluative Criteria* (10) is designed with the realization that schools may differ vastly and still be "good." Therefore, it is felt that schools should be evaluated in terms of their own philosophies and objectives. Further it is agreed that no one person or group is more capable of such an evaluation than the people most fully involved in the educational endeavor, i.e., the school faculty.

The faculties of these schools organized for their self-study, guided by *The Evaluative Criteria* (10), along lines which they individually determined with the principals of the schools participating as group members in the activity. An attempt was made to establish a threat-free atmosphere in which these teachers could work. Teachers not only exam-

ined the program of their own particular subject area, but also the entire school curriculum and organization. Evaluation and recommendations for change were entirely the responsibilities of the participants.

A Teacher Problems Q-Sort, developed by Bills,<sup>2</sup> was used to ascertain from teachers of the control and experimental groups the types of problems which they considered most important and least important to them. Through the use of Q-technique (12), it is possible to quantify and objectify any verbal description. From the types of problems the individual considers important, inference can be made as to the degree to which the particular person meets the criteria heretofore mentioned as characteristic of someone who is truly adequate.

### Evaluation

Evidence is inconclusive at the present time because the analysis of the data is incomplete. Indications are, however, that teachers who participated in a year-long program of self-study reported concern for problems which were positive, central, self-related and future-oriented to a greater degree after participating in this particular in-service activity than before such participation. For instance, problems such as, "How to make the subject matter interesting and meaningful to all pupils of varying ability," and "How to continue to improve my teaching in a fast changing world," were labeled as positive, central, self-related, and future-oriented. "Teaching children who are not adequately prepared by the teachers before us," and "Problems

<sup>2</sup> Robert E. Bills, Assistant Dean, School of Education, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

from socially promoted children," are examples of problems which were considered as negative, peripheral, not self-related, and oriented to the past. A statement concerning differences between control and experimental groups is impossible at the time of the present writing because of the incomplete data analysis.

### Climate for Growth

Regardless of the type of group participation, indications are that the leadership philosophy of the principal is of utmost importance in determining the worth of a particular activity for fostering personal growth. Benson emphasized the importance of the principal-teacher relationship. He concluded that workshop participants who perceived the principal as being emphatically understanding, who placed the locus of self-evaluation within the teacher, and as being positive and unconditional in their regard, changed more than did participants whose perceptual relationships with their principals were not so characterized.

People with supervisory responsibilities have as their primary task that of helping to provide a climate in which teachers can experience personal growth. The concepts of perceptual psychology have vast implications for all areas of our educational structure. Adequate citizens will go forth from our schools only to the extent that the teachers in these schools are adequate, efficient and informed. Therefore, the emphasis which is being placed upon human problems can be understood.

These problems of human relations are the crucial areas of our civilization. There is compelling need to discover ways to increase participation by teach-

ers in studying matters about which they are concerned. More fully recognized now is a need to structure activities in such a way as to allow teachers to give attention to these concerns. If more attention is not given to individual analysis of personal concerns and interests, there may even be a gradual and progressive increase in yielding to outside authority and conformity.

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