Attitudes for Growth

At present many forces seek to shape educational practice. Knowing that these influences are focusing upon school personnel and programs, we would do well to review and to strengthen our own convictions concerning educational practice. For example, it is important for us to recognize that aims in any educational enterprise must become personal in the lives and thinking of the participants if such aims are to be effectively implemented.

Supervisors and administrators, therefore, need to reaffirm their commitment to practices that will foster individuality in teachers, develop self-understanding, allow for self-fulfillment, and provide for growth in ability to live and to work harmoniously with one’s self and with others. Education for teacher growth must be of a kind that best fulfills individual dignity; that helps each teacher develop as a reasoning, responsible, sensitive human being; that enables each teacher to learn the skills of intelligent decision making; that encourages each to assume responsibility for changes needed to implement new decisions. The task of in-service education is not to impart specific methods or approaches that tend to make of the teacher a conditioned, robot-like individual in the classroom. Rather its major task is to help set the conditions for continuing growth and to discover ways of releasing each teacher’s creative energies.

Programs of teacher growth must themselves be both infectious and inspiring examples of educational objectives and goals at work. It is disturbing to us to think of a faculty whose idealism for learning is damaged or destroyed by restrictive and controlling behavior on the part of administration; yet such examples are observed in many school situations today. We can see in local districts tremendous differences in setting up the working arrangements for teachers in the different schools. Teachers, too, vary in kind and in role; in customs, habits, levels of competence, and in ways of working.

These characteristics and conditions are desirable and realistic, and we recognize that, to help teachers grow, we should always move in the direction of helping them improve and develop in diverse ways as individuals. This places tremendous responsibility on a staff for continuing study of how children grow and learn, what demands society places upon the schools and what research and evaluation of present practices imply for future action. An important aspect of supervision and of programs devised for teacher growth is to facilitate such study by teachers toward the improvement of instruction.

A program of in-service education is basically no different from programs of
education at other levels or in other areas of concern. The same psychological principles are operative and the manner in which these principles are applied will largely determine the degree of success achieved by the program. Concerns about the essential elements of the learning process are just as important when working with teachers as with groups of children in classrooms. One essential consideration that is frequently ignored by initiators of in-service programs is the role of attitudes and their relationship to changes in teacher behavior.

There is great need for experimentation in the area of psychological knowledge concerned with attitude development. Much of the available research is descriptive in nature, and knowledge of attitude learning is inadequate in many ways. However, since any effort geared toward change in teacher behavior is dependent upon desirable teacher attitudes, careful attention must be given to what is known.

Many psychologists have tended to follow Allport's definition of attitude as a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related.¹

It is seen that attitudes play an important role in motivation, probably the most basic element of learning. Every program for teacher growth should be geared to developing in teachers motivation that leads to goals which will become self-initiating and independent of extrinsic factors. This is essential if real change in classroom behavior is to result. The close relationship between self motivation and teacher attitude is obvious.

the alternate courses of action open to
them. The evidence seems to point to the
conclusion that teachers do tackle the
problems that appear important to them.
Therefore, all decisions cannot be made
in the district office apart from the ex-
pectations and feelings of those who will
be involved, if in-service work is to
change behavior toward desired ends.
The teacher must identify with the pro-
gram in a deeply personal way.

Goethe wrote, "A fact in our lives is
valuable not so far as it is true, but as it
is significant." Formal programs of in-
struction can extend and clarify attitudes
that have not yet come to have signifi-
cance in the lives and thinking of teach-
ers. As members of a cultural subgroup,
they are likely to act in a manner that is
acceptable to other members of that
group. Such conformity to accepted
norms provides opportunity for a pro-
gram of teacher growth to emphasize
those attitudes and behaviors that have
or will come to have deep significance
for members of the teaching profession.

Opportunities should be created
wherein the teacher may broaden his
scope and understanding of the reality of
his professional role and expectation
through the utilization of varied and
diverse sources of information and activ-
ity. But in the long run, attitudes are
established by living in and being a
meaningful part of an enterprise that
enables one to feel a sense of satisfaction
of personal needs. Therefore, in-service
education cannot stop with the formal-
ized, structured activity. The in-service
program must extend into the day by day
contacts the teacher has with children
and youth in the classroom and with his
co-workers in the school environment.
The following emphasizes this point:

... one's opinions or attitudes serve as
mediators between the inner demands of
the person and the outer environment—the
material, social and, most immediately, the
informational environment of the person. . . .
[Opinions or attitudes are] his major equip-
ment for dealing with reality. This equip-
ment is not a product solely of basic needs
and defenses nor is it fashioned directly ac-
cording to the blueprint of the world in
which the person finds himself. Nor is it
simply borrowed ready-made from the
groups to which he belongs or aspires.
Something of all of these but not quite any
one of them, it is, essentially, an apparatus
for balancing the demands of inner function-
ing and the demands of the environment.  

The key to the problem of teacher
growth is not lack of knowledge, rather
it is inadequate application of available
knowledge to the problems relating to
in-service programs. The well-conceived
program will make the learning process
the focus of organizational effort. The
leadership problem, then, is one of organ-
izational development custom-made to
serve the needs and purposes of individ-
ual teachers and, at the same time, to
take advantage of the indigenous charac-
ter of the situation in which the school
operates. We must cherish the right and
responsibility of the teaching staff on an
individual school basis to propose growth
experiences and the methods to be em-
ployed in achieving such growth. Teacher
emotions and attitudes must be con-
sidered. Behavioral changes become a
part of a person as they are reinforced
through use. The more and better the
participation by the teacher, the more
and better the learning likely to result.
Recognition of these psychological prin-
ciples will make in-service education
more effective and contribute to signifi-
cant individual growth on the part of
teachers.

1 M. Brewster Smith, Jerome S. Bruner and
Robert W. White. Opinions and Personality.