The Teaching Complex: Focus of In-Service Education

TEACHER education has been and generally remains a cheap operation. Classes are too large for professional purposes. Student teaching, internships and other kinds of direct experience with children are usually inadequately staffed in terms of student-supervisor ratios. The consultative relationship that exists between supervisor and student for medicine, psychiatry and psychiatric social work, for example, is very close; the student load is small and the opportunities for exploring every aspect of the student's experience are insured by adequate time and personnel.

This is not the case in the teaching profession. We have been running in virtually every state a penny-pinching operation. This is continuing despite the fact that classroom teaching is one of the most complex of all professions. In some states, California, for example, where the politically motivated attack on professional education threatens to provide the schools with even more poorly prepared classroom teachers, there may be no solution to the problem of adequate teacher preparation at the preservice level. Responsibility for continued teacher growth, always a district function anyway, will rest increasingly on the local schools. In California this movement has overtones related to the general attempt to shift financial responsibility from the state to the local school district, only one of several wrong-way California trends at this point.

Changing In-Service Emphasis

Substantial efforts have been made by both districts and individuals to improve classroom teaching through such devices as extension courses, workshops, curriculum committee work, and advanced degrees and credentials. Unfortunately, the return in teacher growth in classroom teaching skills has not been proportionate to the energy expended. comparatively few teachers work in the classroom as skillfully as they could. The devices that have been employed have not resulted in as much personal growth as we know we can bring about by other methods. Furthermore the efforts used did not draw on the initiative and creativity of the individual teacher and his drive toward professional excellence in the classroom.

The conception of supervision by remote control—through working with teachers on curriculum committees and in workshops—although productive of other benefits has not focused enough on the immensely complex and vital classroom situation. The withdrawal of school leadership from classroom study and participation followed the discrediting of a directive, inspectorial type of super-
vision and curriculum consultation. It seems rather clear that supervisors and curriculum consultants will either work their way back into the picture of classroom instruction or find themselves phased out of the leadership structure.

Role of Consultative Skills

Probably a major reason for the relative ineffectiveness of supervisors and curriculum consultants in the classroom complex has been their inadequate development of consultative skills. Not infrequently they knew more than they understood and far too often they had the answer. The flight of school leadership into group processes, group dynamics and human relations approaches reflected the belief of such leaders that learning how to work with personnel is of prime importance. The benefits of these experiences have been rather substantial, and in some respects these efforts have prepared staffs for the use of a more substantive approach to classroom improvement.

In the past two decades an immense amount of information has become available from the research and theoretical developments in psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology and sociology. This material bearing on the understanding of individual behavior and institutional behavior is available but not widely used in the analysis of the teaching complex.

San Francisco State College's Division of Education staff is working toward increasing availability of such understandings and skills in cooperation with the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute. Thirty-eight members of the College staff are meeting regularly in seminar with psychiatrists who belong to the Institute. The purposes of the seminars are to further understanding of human behavior and the role of the teacher in ego development. From the standpoint of the Institute, the broad purpose is to get further involvement with the problems of positive mental health, particularly in the school setting.

The consultative skills involve understanding of the meaning of behavior to the individual himself, of unconscious motivations, of the teacher's use of himself and students' use of the teacher, of the role of personality development in learning, and of the emotional involvement of cognitive processes.

This is a large order, but it must be recalled that one of the characteristics of a profession is that it masters or strives to master the complex problems of its arena.

Improving the Teaching Act

Many of the ideas presented here were worked out with a group of teachers and administrators in the San Jose Elementary School District, Hamilton Air Force Base, California, during the summer of 1963. Further work on the ideas has continued there and in the Newark School District, Newark, California.

Step 1: A group of 20 teachers and administrators carried on intensive discussions as to the complex nature of the teaching act. The purpose of the discussions was to see all aspects of a classroom situation that have to do with learning. The discussions brought out the influences of climate and teacher

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culture, the concept of coping and its relation to achievement, the factors related to creativity in the classroom, the teacher's personality, the resolution of normal conflicts as seen as a classroom problem, the importance of autonomy in learning, the research in cognitive processes, problem solving, the scientific methods and critical thinking, learning to be a learner, the organization of experience, and the selection of content material involved in the teaching act.

Step II: After adequate discussion of these facets of classrooms, a smaller group of five teachers formed to plan a classroom demonstration for the whole group. The planning group of five worked together and developed learning opportunities for a seventh grade class then attending summer school. They selected one member to do the teaching for demonstration purposes.

Step III: The observation. It is essential that the observation group contain as many of the kinds of skills called for by the complex teaching act as possible. Although a group can make growth in any case through the cooperative planning and demonstration procedure, the presence of individuals with well-developed consultative skills greatly speeds up growth. The observation may occupy a short time or a lengthy period depending on the purposes of the planning group.

Step IV: Following the observation, the entire group discussed the learning-teaching experience, focusing on every aspect of the complex. At this stage it is essential that the group know how to work together without undue friction. Preparation for the discussion included a review of good group process techniques and an agreement as to the limits of discussion. Participants focus on the meaning of various behaviors and acts, suggest alternative procedures and ways of increasing the number of learnings coming out of the situation.

Step V: The planning group of five continue to plan further demonstrations with the group of children, furnish increasingly detailed information about the children and the complexity of the learning situation. On replanning and new observation the level of group analysis tends to increase. In Newark, where attention is focused on improvement of the core courses, a continuous development covering aspects of problem-centered core will be involved.

Step VI: Further reading in all contributing disciplines and research studies follows the development of the cooperative demonstration approach.

It is too soon to say how far such procedures can carry a teacher toward the peak of his teaching skill. As we have experienced the process so far, it appears to contain the elements of self-improvement that characterize a profession: use of research data, personal initiative in improvement, employment of colleague cooperation as a means of professional improvement, focus on the actual operation needing to be improved, the growth of the personality, and the use of a deepening understanding of human behavior.