

The Personal Approach to Good Teaching

TO plan effective programs for teacher education we need the very best definition of good teaching we can acquire. That seems clear enough. How to arrive at such a definition, however, has proved to be a most difficult task. Despite millions of dollars and millions of man-hours poured into research on the problem over the past 50 years, the results have continued to be frustrating and disappointing—until recently. It now appears that our failure to find useful definitions may be due to the inadequacies of the frame of reference from which we have attacked the problem.

The Teacher as Knower

The earliest conception of the good teacher was that of the scholar. It was assumed that a person who knew could teach others. Of course it is true that a teacher has to know something but, even without research, it is apparent to anyone who looks that "knowing" is simply not enough. Most of us can recall out of our own experience the teacher who "knew his subject but could not put it

across." In some places there can even be found good teachers whose depth of information in a particular field is woefully lacking! This is often a shocking discovery to some critics of education who still equate teaching with scholarship. One of my own studies on good teaching demonstrated that *both*, good teachers and bad ones, knew equally well what a good teaching situation *ought* to be like (Combs, 1961). Knowing is certainly important to teaching, but it is clear, good teaching involves much more.

The "Competencies" Approach to Teaching

A second approach to defining good teaching has been in terms of teacher "competencies." The thinking goes something like this: If we know what the expert teachers do, or are like, then we can teach the beginners to be like that. This is a straightforward, uncomplicated approach to the problem and seems logically sound.

This idea has produced great quantities of research into the traits of good teachers and their methods. This has provided us with long lists of competencies supposedly characteristic of

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good teachers. In the beginning these lists were quite simple. Since, however, what people do is always related to the situations they are in, every situation calls for a different behavior and the more situations the researchers examine, the longer the lists of competencies have become.

The following, for example, is a list made by a conference of "Superior Teachers" in 1962:

- Good teachers should:
- Know their subject
- Know much about related subjects
- Be adaptable to new knowledge
- Understand the process of becoming
- Recognize individual differences
- Be a good communicator
- Develop an inquiring mind
- Be available
- Be committed
- Be enthusiastic
- Have a sense of humor
- Have humility
- Cherish his own individuality
- Have convictions
- Be sincere and honest
- Act with integrity
- Show tolerance and understanding
- Be caring
- Have compassion
- Have courage
- Have personal security
- Be creative
- Be versatile
- Be willing to try
- Be adaptable
- Believe in God.

This is but a short list. There are much longer ones!

At first, attempts to discover the competencies of good teachers were highly specific. Hundreds of attempts were made to demonstrate that good teachers had this or that trait, used this or that method—all to no avail! Good teaching simply could not be defined in terms of any particular trait or method. In 1959, the American Association of School Ad-

ministrators commissioned a team to review the research on the problem. Out of this the school administrators hoped to find some guidelines which might help them make the practical decisions about a high quality of teaching necessary in carrying on their jobs. Sadly, the team was forced to report that there is no specific trait or method sufficiently associated with good teaching to provide clear distinctions (Ellena, 1961).

Some investigators have thought better discriminations might be found in generic, rather than specific studies of the "teaching act." Accordingly, they have turned their attention to the *general* traits or methods used by the teacher. Approaching the problem in this way they have been able to find fairly stable distinctions in such general terms as, "good teachers are considerate," or "child centered," or "concerned about structure." The most significant of these is a study by Marie Hughes (1959) under a grant from the U. S. Office of Education, Cooperative Research Program. Dr. Hughes developed an exhaustive system for analyzing teacher behavior and applied this system to time sample observations of teachers in the classroom. She was able to demonstrate a number of general classes of behavior seemingly characteristic of good teachers. Among these were such categories as controlling, imposition, facilitating, content development, response, and positive or negative affectivity.

Similar attempts to analyze teacher behavior have been carried out by Flanders (1960), Smith (1961), Bowers (1961), Filson (1957), and Medley (1959). These attempts to examine the more global aspects of effective teaching have been somewhat more successful in discriminating between good and

poor teaching than research directed at specific or detailed descriptions of behavior, or methods. But they still do not provide us with the definitive distinctions needed by the profession. Good teaching, it now seems clear, is not a direct function of general traits or methods.

Some Practical Difficulties of the Competencies Approach

The attempt to develop a teacher education program based upon the competencies approach runs into some very knotty problems. In the first place, it is a fallacy to assume the methods of the experts either can, or should be, taught directly to the beginners. It is seldom we can determine what should be for the beginner by examining what the expert does well. I learned this some years ago when I was responsible for teaching failing university students more effective methods of study. At first glance it would seem logical to determine what should be taught to the failing students by determining the study habits of successful ones. Such an approach to curriculum construction, however, is disastrous!

Successful students study most whimsically. They operate without plan, go to the movies often, indulge in all sorts of extracurricular activities and generally behave in ways that would be suicidal for students teetering on the brink of failure. It simply does not follow that what is good for the expert is good for the novice too! Nor is it true, that the way to become expert is to do what the expert does.

Some of the methods used by the expert can only be used *because* he is expert. Many experienced teachers have learned to deal with most classroom dis-

turbances by ignoring them. Yet beginners cannot ignore them! The expert is able to ignore matters precisely because he *is* expert. Some methods cannot even be comprehended without adequate prior experience. One must grow to achieve them. Asking the young teacher to use methods which do not fit him may only turn him loose in the blackboard jungle to fight for his life with inappropriate weapons.

The creation of long lists of competencies is likely to be deeply discouraging and disillusioning to the young teacher for another reason. Evaluations of "goodness" or "badness" become attached to methods, and students thereafter are expected to judge their own adequacies in these terms. The net effect is to set such impossible goals of excellence that no one can ever hope to reach them. This is a terribly depressing and discouraging prospect.

Discouraging and disillusioning as the competencies approach is for the young teacher, it has equally unhappy effects on the more experienced teachers. A vast complex of competencies, all of which are demanded as criteria for good teaching leaves the individual defenseless before criticism. No matter what he does well, it is never enough! There is always so much more that he might have done, or should have done, that he can rarely find pleasure or satisfaction in what he actually has done. Add to this the fact that many of the competencies demanded do not fit his particular personality, and so could probably never be achieved anyhow, and the defeat of the individual becomes almost inevitable. In time, the feeling of inadequacy produced by continual failure to meet impossible goals undermines professional pride and is likely to produce a guilt-ridden teacher suffering from a

secret feeling of being "too little and too late." It should not be surprising if, after years of this kind of experience, the will to try shrivels and dies on the vine.

To use particular competencies as a measure of good teaching, irrespective of personalities, situations or purposes, leads us to the ridiculous conclusion that some of the very people who taught us most, were poor teachers. When I hear young teachers-in-training remark, "Oh, he is a lousy teacher but you sure learn a lot!" I am forced to conclude that the determination of the goodness of teaching on the basis of competencies is highly questionable.

The methods people use are highly personal. These methods cannot be judged apart from the personality they express. No one, after all, looks well, feels well, or behaves well, in another person's clothing. Methods, like the clothes we wear, must fit the people we are. Good teaching is a highly personal matter.

The Personal Character of Good Teaching

Is there a better approach? I think there is. As we have seen, the research on good teaching is unable to isolate any common trait or practice of good teachers. Yet these unanimous results, themselves, represent a most important commonality. They demonstrate the uniqueness and individuality of good teachers! The very failure of research to define common factors is, itself, a demonstration that a good teacher is primarily a personality. If good teachers are unique individuals we could predict from the start that the attempt to find *common uniqueness* would be unfruitful!

A good teacher is first and foremost a person. He has competence, to be sure, but not a *common* set of competencies like anyone else. Like the students he teaches, he is infinitely unique and becoming more so all the time. The fact of his personness is the most important and determining thing about him. The personal character of good teaching can be documented by almost any of us from our own experience. If one thinks back to his own school days he will probably discover that the good teachers he had in his own lifetime did not all behave alike or, even, with great similarity. Rather, each stands out as a person, an individual, some for one reason, some for another.

Apparently, there can be no such thing as a "good" or "bad" method of teaching. The terms "good" and "bad" can be applied to results, outcomes, purposes or ends. The methods we use to achieve these ends, however, only derive their value from the goals and purposes for which they are used. The good teacher is not one who behaves in a "given" way. He is an artist, skillful in producing a desirable result. The *result* may be considered "good" or "bad," but not the method.

The "Self as Instrument" Concept

This shift in our thinking from a mechanistic to a personal view of teaching is by no means confined to our profession alone. In fact, most other professions dealing with human problems have preceded us in this direction. The effective professional worker, in medicine, social work, clinical psychology, guidance or nursing is no longer seen as a technician applying methods in more or less mechanical fashion the way he has been taught. We now understand him

as an intelligent human being using himself, his knowledge and the resources at hand to solve the problems for which he is responsible. He is a person who has learned to use himself as an effective instrument (Combs, 1961).

If we adapt this "self as instrument" concept of the professional worker to teaching, it means that teachers colleges must concern themselves with *persons* rather than competencies. It means the individualization of instruction we have sought for the public schools must be applied to the teachers colleges as well. It calls for the production of creative individuals, capable of shifting and changing to meet the demands and opportunities afforded in daily tasks. Such a teacher will not behave in a set way. His behavior will change from moment to moment, from day to day, rapidly adjusting to the needs of his students, the situations he is in, the purposes he seeks to fulfill and the methods and materials he has at hand.

The good teacher is no carbon copy but stands out as a unique and effective personality, sometimes for one reason, sometimes for another, but always for something intensely and personally his own. He has found ways of using himself, his talents and his environment in a fashion that aids both his students and himself to achieve satisfaction—their own and society's too. Artists sometimes refer to "the discovery of one's personal idiom" and the expression seems very apt applied to teaching as well. We may define the effective teacher as a *unique human being who has learned to use his self effectively and efficiently for carrying out his own and society's purposes.*

The production of this kind of person is not a question of teaching him what to do. Modern perceptual psychology tells us that a person's behavior is the

direct result of his perceptions, how things seem to him at the moment of his behaving. To change an individual's behavior, it is necessary to help him see himself and his world differently. It is here that teacher education must direct its effort. The modern giant computer is able to provide "best answers" to vast quantities of data depending upon the formulas built into the machine. In a similar fashion, the effectiveness of the teacher is dependent upon the internal "formulas" which select and control his behavior as he is confronted with changing situations. These human formulas are the perceptions he holds of himself, his purposes and the world in which he must live and operate.

Whether an individual can behave effectively and efficiently in a given situation, according to the perceptual psychologists, will depend upon how he is perceiving at the time. To change his behavior, furthermore, it will be necessary to produce a change in his perceptions of himself and his world. This means for teacher education, we need first to know how good teachers perceive. Knowing that, we may then be able to help teachers perceive themselves and their tasks in those ways.

A Perceptual View of Good Teaching

What kinds of beliefs, understandings, values and concepts make up the perceptual organization of good teachers?

This way of looking at teacher education is so new that we do not yet have the precise research we need to guide us. This need not deter us, however, for there is evidence enough at least to start us thinking on new tracks, designing new techniques and planning for the research we need. To this point we have the following sources of information to

draw upon for defining the probable dimensions of good teaching in perceptual terms:

1. Perceptual psychological theory, especially that having to do with the nature of the self and fully functioning behavior

2. Research on the perceptions of good practitioners in other helping professions (Combs and Soper, 1963)

3. The research already existing in our profession

4. The experiences accumulated by thousands of teachers engaged in day to day "action research" in the classroom.

Drawing upon these four sources it would appear that a good teacher is characterized by typical perceptual organizations in six general areas:

A. His knowledge of his subject

B. His frame of reference for approaching his problems

C. His perceptions of others

D. His perceptions of self

E. His perceptions of the purpose and process of learning

F. His perceptions of appropriate methods.

Under each of these major headings a series of hypotheses can be drawn concerning the teacher's characteristic perceptual organization in that area. The following is a list developed at the University of Florida by the author and his colleagues over the past five years. These were originally drawn up to serve as suggestions for future research. The list is presented here both as an amplification of the "self as instrument" concept and as possible propositions for further research by others who may be interested in the problem. The list is by no means a complete one but it serves

as a point of departure for consideration of the self as instrument approach. It is presented as a promising series of leads which may excite other researchers, as it has my colleagues and me, to explore these matters further. Some of the following hypotheses (marked by °) we have already corroborated in research on good and poor counselors (Combs, 1963). Others (marked by †) are currently being explored in several researches on the perceptual organization of good teachers. Each hypothesis is stated as the two ends of a continuum with the perceptions presumed characteristic of the good teacher at the left and those of the poor teacher at the right. Those hypotheses already studied or currently under investigation include more extensive definitions. Several items, not yet subjected to research test, do not have definitions included.

Hypotheses Regarding the Perceptual Organization of Effective Teachers

A. *A Good Teacher Has Rich Perceptions About His Subject:* The good teacher will need to be well informed about the subject matter he is responsible for teaching. That is to say, he must have a rich and extensive field of perceptions about his subject upon which he can call as required. The good teacher is not stupid. This aspect of good teaching provides us with nothing new. It is the aspect of the teaching function we have known best and developed most fully in the past.

B. *The Good Teacher's Frame of Reference:* The good teacher is always keenly aware of how things seem from the point of view of those with whom he works. His frame of reference for approaching problems and people is humanistic rather than mechanistic. He is

deeply sensitive to the private worlds of his students and colleagues and accepts their feelings, attitudes, beliefs and understandings as legitimate and important data in human interaction.

Hypothesis 1* †—Internal-External frame of reference: The teacher's general frame of reference can be described as internal rather than external; that is to say, he seems sensitive to and concerned with how things look to others with whom he interacts and uses this as a basis for his own behavior.

Hypothesis 2* †—People-Things orientation: Central to the thinking of the teacher is a concern with people and their reactions rather than with things and events.

Hypothesis 3* †—Meanings-Facts orientation: The teacher is more concerned with the perceptual experience of people than with the objective events. He is sensitive to how things seem to people rather than being exclusively concerned with concrete events.

Hypothesis 4* †—Immediate-Historical causation: The teacher seeks the causes of people's behavior in their current thinking, feeling, beliefs and understandings rather than in objective descriptions of the forces exerted upon them now or in the past.

Hypothesis 5—Hopeful-Despairing.

C. Perceptions About What People Are Like and How They Behave: Teaching is a human relationship. To behave effectively good teachers must possess the most accurate understandings about people and their behavior available in our generation. Each of us can only behave in terms of what we believe is so. What a teacher believes, therefore, about the nature of his students will have a most important effect on how he behaves toward them. Let us take a simple example to illustrate this point.

If a teacher believes his students have the capacity to learn, he will behave quite differently from the teacher who

has serious doubts about the capacities of his charges. The teacher who believes his students *can*, begins his task with hope and assurance that both he and his students may be successful. He can place confidence and trust in his students and be certain that, if he is successful in facilitating and encouraging the learning process, they can, they *will* learn.

The teacher, on the other hand, who does not believe his students are capable approaches his task with two strikes against him. He is licked before he starts. If you do not believe that children *can*, then it is certainly not safe to trust them. False beliefs about the nature of people can only result in the selection of inappropriate ways of dealing with them. A prime function of the teachers college must be to assist its students to clear and accurate understandings of the nature of people and their behavior.

Hypothesis 6* †—Able-Unable. The teacher perceives others as having the capacities to deal with their problems. He believes that they can find adequate solutions to events as opposed to doubting the capacity of people to handle themselves and their lives.

Hypothesis 7* †—Friendly-Unfriendly: The teacher sees others as being friendly and enhancing. He does not regard them as threatening to himself but rather sees them as essentially well intentioned rather than evil intentioned.

Hypothesis 8* †—Worthy-Unworthy: The teacher tends to see other people as being of worth rather than unworthy. He sees them as possessing a dignity and integrity which must be respected and maintained rather than seeing people as unimportant, whose integrity may be violated or treated as of little account.

Hypothesis 9 †—Internally-Externally motivated: The teacher sees people and their

behavior as essentially developing from within rather than as a product of external events to be molded, directed; sees people as creative, dynamic rather than passive or inert.

Hypothesis 10* †—Dependable-Undependable: The teacher sees people as essentially trustworthy and dependable in the sense of behaving in a lawful way. He regards their behavior as understandable rather than capricious, unpredictable or negative.

Hypothesis 11 †—Helpful-Hindering. The teacher sees people as being potentially fulfilling and enhancing to self rather than impeding or threatening. He regards people as important sources of satisfaction rather than sources of frustration and suspicion.

Hypothesis 12—Unthreatening-Threatening.

Hypothesis 13—Respectable-Of no account.

D. *The Teacher's Perception of Self:* Perceptual psychology indicates that the behavior of the individual at any moment is a function of how he sees his situation and himself. In recent years we have come to understand the crucial importance of the self concept in affecting every aspect of a person's life. It makes a vast difference what people believe about themselves.

The behavior of a teacher, like that of everyone else, is a function of his concepts of self. Teachers who believe they are able will try. Teachers who do not think they are able will avoid responsibilities. Teachers who feel they are liked by their students will behave quite differently from those who feel they are unliked. Teachers who feel they are acceptable to the administration can behave quite differently from those who have serious doubts about their acceptability. Teachers who feel their profession has dignity and integrity can themselves

behave with dignity and integrity. Teachers who have grave doubts about the importance and value of their profession may behave apologetically or overly aggressively with their students and with their colleagues. It is apparent that, if the self concept is a fundamental in producing the behavior of an individual as has been suggested by modern psychology, then teacher education programs must give it a vital place in the production of new teachers.

Hypothesis 14* †—Identified with-Apart from: The teacher tends to see himself as a part of all mankind; he sees himself as identified with people rather than as withdrawn, removed, apart or alienated from others.

Hypothesis 15* †—Adequate-Inadequate: The teacher generally sees himself as enough; as having what is needed to deal with his problems. He does not see himself as lacking and as unable to cope with problems.

Hypothesis 16* †—Trustworthy-Untrustworthy: The teacher has trust in his own organism. He sees himself as essentially dependable, reliable, as having the potentiality for coping with events as opposed to seeing self in a tentative fashion with doubts about the potentiality and reliability of the organism.

Hypothesis 17* †—Worthy-Unworthy: The teacher sees himself as a person of consequence, dignity, integrity and worthy of respect; as opposed to being a person of little consequence who can be overlooked, discounted, whose dignity and integrity do not matter.

Hypothesis 18* †—Wanted-Unwanted: The teacher sees himself as essentially likable, attractive (in personal, not physical appearance sense), wanted, and in general capable of bringing forth a warm response from those people important to him; as opposed to feeling ignored, unwanted, or rejected by others.

Hypothesis 19—Accepted-Not accepted

Hypothesis 20—Certain, sure-Doubting

Hypothesis 21—Feels aware-Unaware.

E. The Purpose and Process of Learning: Behavior always has direction. Whatever we do is always determined by the purposes we have in mind at the time of our behaving or misbehaving. What teachers perceive to be their own and society's purposes makes a great deal of difference in their behavior. The teacher who believes schools exist only for the able and that "it is a waste of time to fool with the poorer students," behaves quite differently from the teacher who perceives society's purpose as that of helping *all* children become the best they can. Similarly, what the teacher believes about how students learn will markedly affect his behavior. One teacher, believing children must be molded, teaches loyalty to country by carefully censoring what students read and hear about democracy and communism. Another teacher, believing children learn best when confronted with all kinds of evidence, takes a different tack in teaching his class. The clarity and accuracy of perceptions about the purposes and processes of learning will have profound effects on the behavior of teachers.

How the teacher sees the task of teaching, in the immediate sense, as it applies to moment to moment operations in the classroom, or in the broadest sense, of society's needs and purposes, will determine the way he behaves on the job. The teachers college must help him find these understandings and make them a part of his very being. Only the best and most accurate perceptions will suffice.

Hypothesis 22*†—Freeing-Controlling: The teacher perceives the purpose of the

helping task as one of freeing, assisting, releasing, facilitating rather than a matter of controlling, manipulating, coercing, blocking, inhibiting.

Hypothesis 23*†—Larger-Smaller perceptions: The teacher tends to view events in a broad rather than narrow perspective. He is concerned with larger connotations of events, with larger, more extensive implications than the immediate and specific. He is not exclusively concerned with details but can perceive beyond the immediate to future and larger meanings.

Hypothesis 24*†—Self revealing-Self concealing: The teacher sees his appropriate role as self revealing rather than self concealing; that is, he appears to be willing to disclose himself. He can treat his feelings and shortcomings as important and significant rather than hiding them or covering them up. He seems willing to be himself.

Hypothesis 25†—Self involved-Self withheld: The teacher sees his appropriate role as one of commitment to the helping process, a willingness to enter into interaction, as opposed to being inert or remaining aloof or remote from interaction.

Hypothesis 26†—Furthering process-Achieving goals: The teacher sees his appropriate role as one of encouraging and facilitating the process of search and discovery, as opposed to promoting, or working for a personal goal or preconceived solution.

Hypothesis 27—Helping-Dominating

Hypothesis 28—Understanding-Condemning

Hypothesis 29—Accepting-Rejecting

Hypothesis 30—Valuing integrity-Violating integrity

Hypothesis 31—Positive-Negative

Hypothesis 32—Open-Closed to experience

Hypothesis 33—Tolerant of ambiguity-Intolerant.

(Continued on page 399)

4. What do you mean by "education"?

5. Is it true that American students have "affairs"? What does that mean?

6. Do American educators believe in sex education?

7. What is happening about integration?

8. Do you have a high rate of juvenile delinquency?

Hypothesis 36—Acceptance superior to appealing

Hypothesis 37—Acceptance superior to rejecting (attacking)

Hypothesis 38—Permissiveness superior to authoritarianism

Hypothesis 39—Open communication superior to closed communication

Hypothesis 40—"Giving" methods superior to withholding.

Personal Approach—Combs

(Continued from page 377)

F. Perception of Appropriate Methods: The methods teachers use must fit the kinds of people they are. An effective teacher must have an armamentarium of methods upon which he may call as these are needed to carry out his teaching duties. These may vary widely from teacher to teacher and even from moment to moment. Whatever their nature they must fit the situations and purposes of the teacher and be appropriate for the students with whom they are used.

The teacher education program must help each student find the methods best suited to him, to his purposes, his task and the peculiar populations and problems with which he must deal on the job. This is not so much a matter of *teaching* methods as one of helping students *discover* methods.

While methods must always be highly personal, certain perceptions about appropriate methods may be characteristic of good teaching. Among the hypotheses we hope to explore in this area are the following:

Hypothesis 34—Helping methods seen as superior to manipulating methods

Hypothesis 35—Cooperation superior to competition

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