Editor, Educational Leadership

Dear Sir:

Even Educational Leadership rarely gets hold of an article as fundamentally important as Arthur Combs’ “The Personal Approach to Good Teaching” (March 1964). It draws one of those watershed lines between an old conception and a new one, and we ought to be paying it close attention.

Particularly, we in ASCD ought to use our influence and search out every way to test his hypotheses—and if they are valid to base action upon them. For if Combs is right—if the personal factors really are the things that matter to good teaching—then the implications are enormous. Then any system of teacher education, or selection, or in-service supervision based merely on the old conception of “the teacher as knower” or on “the competencies approach” is fundamentally invalid. And great vistas of new levels of effectiveness open out before us once we base our work on a valid theory.

I, for one, believe he is on the right track. Everything in my own work of the past half-dozen years corroborates his position. Although, in the San Francisco State College Teacher Education Project, we did not spell out the detailed hypotheses he has listed, we definitely worked in terms of the “self as instrument” concept—and groped our way closer and closer to it as our work proceeded. We would have applauded his definition of 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.” We did everything we were inventive enough to imagine to help each young candidate-for-teaching get insight into his own self, honor it, and learn to use it. Wherever we could we broke down the old confining rigidities and opened up the situation to permit personal growth.

We cannot claim to have “proved” very much finally in an objective, quantifiable way. It is going to take a great deal of experimenting to find out how to give instructional expression to the basic idea. But our excellent and veteran staff finished four years of hard reality-testing pretty sure that the prize lies in this direction. And, having discarded most of the formal collegiate machinery upon which we usually depend, we came out confident that the practical, managerial problems can be handled.

As I have already indicated, it matters terribly if the position Combs has enunciated is essentially correct. It means a
new conception of our work. The times have been running heavily toward a meager, mechanistic view of teaching. If this new creative insight is valid, we ASCDers had better be nourishing it for all we are worth.

Sincerely yours,
Fred T. Wilhelms
Associate Secretary
National Association of Secondary-School Principals

Editor's Note: Readers may well be interested in a fuller account of the Teacher Education Project to which Dr. Wilhelms alludes. Having studied the official report, I find myself wishing that more educators could see it. Unfortunately, Dr. Wilhelms says the supply is extremely limited. Yet he can provide a loan copy, and he is willing to send a listing of published summaries of the work.—R. R. L.

Comments on "A Climate for Self-Improvement"

Editor, Educational Leadership

Dear Sir:

The author of the lead editorial in Educational Leadership for February 1964, Richard L. Foster, has rendered a service to supervisors by bringing to their attention certain issues that shape professional practice. The editorial features a number of provocative "hypotheses" about how best to further teachers' self-development.

In their present form, however, there is little possibility of testing these hypotheses experimentally inasmuch as Dr. Foster has not indicated what would constitute evidence of self-development. Indeed, there exists the likelihood that supervisors could be misled if they tried to base their educational practices upon these statements.

The "hypothesis" that follows is a case in point: "No human being, in a final analysis, can be held responsible for the development of or the change in any other individual."

In his arguments supporting this proposition, Dr. Foster says that because of their professional roles, consultants, supervisors and principals do not have the responsibility to change teachers but that they are responsible only to express freely their own points of view.

Analysis shows that Dr. Foster has combined factual (descriptive) statements and value (prescriptive) statements; he has confused what one can do with what one should do.

Just as a teacher can change Johnny's behavior, so that he reads the word "horse" as "horse" instead of "pony" (as, for instance, in a caption under a picture), so do supervisors get teachers to behave differently than they would were the supervisor not exercising his authority and influence.

The very existence of schools implies a responsibility for changing other people at least within the teacher-student relationship. Furthermore, the appointment of supervisors with the authority to rate, to promote, and to fire teachers (with or without "showing cause") indicates that supervisors are held responsible for changing other people. "Responsibility" here means that we would be justified in rewarding (praising) or punishing (blaming) a supervisor or principal who was unwilling to attempt to change the teachers in his system. Legally, the role that they are required
to fill includes just this kind of responsibility.

Dr. Foster would have been on firmer ground had he said that supervisors should only be held responsible for change when the supervisor controls all variables necessary for the change. But this notion of "responsibility" is quite different; it involves not the analysis of the responsibilities that an individual has because of his role or status in a certain legally authorized system, but rather the question of whether we should praise or blame a supervisor for those results of his actions which are beyond his power or knowledge to control. It is not likely that supervisors will change teachers into "good persons." Parents, friends, and a host of significant experiences of a lifetime produce the behavior subsumed under such a notion. But supervisors often do control variables necessary for changing many of the teacher's classroom practices as well as many of his ways of dealing with fellow staff members and parents.

Whether or not supervisors should change the behavior of a teacher in a given way is not to be decided by appeal to observations showing that supervisors do in fact change others. "Am I my brother's keeper?" is a philosophical and religious question that has not consistently received a single answer.

The desire to remove oneself from the consequences of his actions upon others is common to many of us. In accepting a professional role that carries the expectation that change in learners will occur, however, the individual teacher, supervisor or principal loses some of his personal freedom. If one does not want to accept the responsibility for change in learners or teachers, he is free to seek an occupation that does not demand the application of enlightened scientific knowledge to other human beings with the purpose of changing them.

Taking the responsibility for changing the behavior of other people does not imply that the educator—be he teacher or supervisor—must believe that there is "an absolute right and wrong way to teach," as Dr. Foster holds it does. Rather it involves the further responsibility of using the most completely verified empirically derived knowledge that is relevant to the task of changing others' behavior—a task which is his by virtue of his status and his professional training as an educator.

Precisely what changes in the behavior of teachers are desirable is a question that must be argued on its own merits; but the attempt to retreat from this responsibility serves no purpose at all. Indeed, at least one view of professional ethics maintains that those supervisors and teachers who freely express their personal opinions but never permit themselves to be held responsible for the effects of this action upon their legal charges are guilty of malpractice.

Sincerely,

John D. McNeil
Associate Professor of Education
University of California
Los Angeles, and
C. J. B. Macmillan
Assistant Professor of Education
University of California
Los Angeles

Editor, Educational Leadership
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:

I was delighted to receive a copy of the communication to Educational Leadership in which John D. McNeil reacted to a recent editorial that I wrote.
It is gratifying to know that a colleague is interested enough in a presentation to raise questions in regard to the hypotheses therein stated. It is also provocative to note that we seem to be in a vis-à-vis relationship, namely, the college professor raising the question as to whether a practicing administrator is presenting a theory that implies a lack of responsibility.

I readily admit that I disagree with some of Dr. McNeil’s concepts:

1. Supervisors are not appointed “with the authority to rate, to promote, and to fire teachers.” In fact, in the District in which I work, consultants (supervisors) do not consider their roles as having any relationship to the above functions.

2. Supervisors and consultants are not hired for the purpose of rewarding or punishing, but they are professional peers selected for the purpose of consultation with other personnel.

3. Principals do not promote or fire but have the responsibility to report their perceptions of teachers to the superintendent. Hiring and firing are responsibilities reserved for the Board of Trustees on recommendation from the Superintendent.

4. I believe that the highest form of responsibility in administration is to communicate one’s observations, understandings and perceptions. Dr. McNeil’s proposal suggests a controlling function of administration rather than a creative function.

I agree that this is a very difficult concept for most people to understand and equally as difficult, I am sure, to present. So much of our culture has been built on “doing something to someone” that it is difficult to grasp a concept that is based on “being something with someone.”

It is indeed a pleasure to continue to communicate ideas with you.

Sincerely,
Richard L. Foster
District Superintendent
Jefferson Elementary
School District
Daly City, California

Values and Beliefs—Buhler
(Continued from page 522)

Victor Frankl speaks of an “existential vacuum” as of that existence in which people give no ultimate purpose or meaning to their lives.

The opposite tendency of the person who tries to develop his best potentials, is that of self-fulfillment. This person has given his existence a purpose and feels neither empty nor bored. He has enthusiasm and belief in what he is doing. And he feels that in giving 1 is best, he is fulfilling himself.

Role of Psychology

The analytic exploration of our motives and the clarification of our best potentials are not easy to accomplish without psychological guidance. The growing awareness of this fact has recently led many responsible leaders among educators and ministers to organize “self-discovery” groups under psychological direction. These are groups of grown-ups as well as of adolescents who are interested in learning to understand themselves and the workings of their motivation. They also want to be aware of their own inclinations and best potentials, so as to be equipped to set up proper goals and values for themselves. Thus psychology seems to play an important role for adequate self-development of the person of our time.