

## **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

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### When Teachers Are Rejected: A Reply

East Lansing, Michigan

Dear Editor:

I agree with Dr. Alam that a problem exists when teachers are rejected by their colleagues and superiors because they are different (assuming they are not incompetent). However, I think the problem has not been dealt with adequately or sufficiently by the article "X Institutions with Y Purposes."<sup>1</sup>

The article is riddled with unsupported assumptions and misleading statements. The most blatant of these is that the application of S-R learning theory is meaningless and external. The only practical example of "meaningful" teaching given in the article is an application of operant conditioning, in which one incentive, knowledge of results, is presented to students for learning instead of an ambiguous stimulus, the course grade.

The distinction between external and internal motivation is meaningless and functionless. In Dr. Alam's school example one could quite readily point to an external stimulus—that of the knowledge of results provided. I am fairly sure that in almost all human behavior (except reflexes) one could point to an external incentive or payoff.

The notion that deprivation of food and water is required of students in school to apply reinforcement principles is a distortion of these principles. Numerous studies have demonstrated that humans respond to all sorts of stimuli which act as conditioned reinforcers, such as praise and attention, and that biological reinforcers such as food, water, and sex are not the only events that can act as reinforcers.

It is stated that teachers who understand the learning process and apply these principles are the ones who are rejected. The only evidence presented to support this statement is a letter from a former student, which from its face value is supposed to convince readers that "Jim" was a competent teacher. This statement needs further support. I would also like to suggest that if a teacher were competent in the application of learning principles, he could not only use these to teach his students, but would also be able to teach his colleagues and avoid the rejection spoken of.

Dr. Alam ends by a plea to support teachers who are "different." I fail to see a concrete suggestion for the solution of the original problem posed. I would like to rephrase the problem and suggest one possible solution of many.

The problem is that at times there are competent teachers who, when setting up the conditions for motivation and learning, pro-

<sup>1</sup> See: Dale V. Alam, "X Institutions with Y Purposes," *Educational Leadership* 26 (7): 674-76; April 1969.

vide enough change in the environment that others around them have an "emotional" reaction. Not only is this reaction to a change noticeable in well learned adult human behavior, but it is also apparent to every mother who changes some element in her child's environment. From this analysis, a meaningful solution can be suggested. A gradual introduction of a feared or anxiety provoking stimulus into the presence of a relaxed person will eventually be tolerated and perhaps even enjoyed by the person involved. This method calls for the gradual but steady introduction of innovative teaching or innovative materials in a school. This can be practically done by: (a) use of sharing periods in which teachers

explain, demonstrate, and discuss each other's methods; (b) workshops which explain the uses and methods of innovative practices; and (c) explanation of changes occurring in school before they affect parents and students.

A principal or teacher can force these things into a school all at once. However, one who knows behavior principles could predict that he risks having the emotional reactions that will occur associated with the innovative teacher and his methods.

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## The Person Called Teacher: A Reply

Middletown, New York

Dear Editor:

The Dickson-Creighton article "Who Is This Person We Call Teacher?"<sup>1</sup> in the February 1969 issue is to be faulted less for what it says than for what it omits to say.

While today's teachers are from "broad and diverse backgrounds" in many respects, a probable majority have, in at least two respects, a commonality of background which, as it affects their teaching behavior, may well override the variety that may be found in their other attributes. The two elements to which I refer, and which, by the way, are interrelated, are these:

1. They are newly arrived in the middle class from the lower middle and the upper lower classes. The chief effects upon them of this social class background have been

<sup>1</sup> George E. Dickson and Samuel L. Creighton. "Who Is This Person We Call Teacher?" *Educational Leadership* 26 (6): 455-58; February 1969.

concern for economic security, uncertainty about self-worth, and therefore a great impulse to conform, to play it safe.

2. They are products of schools operated by teachers of an earlier vintage much like themselves. A few key words sum up the atmosphere, the driving spirit, and the operational (as opposed to theoretical) purposes of those schools: *memoriter*, closure, convergence, precept (*not* example), conformity, stagnancy, irrelevance. Having found security as pupils in such schools, they have naturally chosen to teach, and equally naturally, if unconsciously, they follow in the footsteps of their own preceptors.

Their "rise" from along the borderline between the middle and lower socioeconomic classes involves a rejection of their own origin and a suppression of their true selves. This expresses itself in incapacity to develop rapport with lower class children. Like certain converts in politics and religion, they incline toward fanaticism about even the most trivial

of values which they suppose the middle class holds dear. Their effort to impose these values on children not only is foredoomed to failure, but sabotages their chances of getting across even the basic "three R's."

Perceiving their own "success" as the outcome of conformity and convergent thinking, and having had little opportunity themselves to do any original thinking, they are hardly set up to teach in a manner that will nurture creativity and the higher cognitive powers in children.

I say these things, not to vilify teachers, but to draw attention to the depth of the problem to which Dickson and Creighton sought to address themselves. Nor do I express them out of some kind of social class snobbism, since my own background is essentially that which I have described. I seem to have overcome some, but by no means all, of the strictures that such a background imposes on one's personality and perspective.

My consuming object over the last half-dozen years has been to ascertain where, how, and by whom the vicious circle can be interrupted. I can formulate some plausible

hypotheses, but they are unrealistic as solutions so long as the problem is not apprehended by the public and the authorities.

A long-range possibility is that, if teachers' salaries were made commensurate with those of the "high" professions, the kind of people attracted to the profession would be different. Another, which would bear fruit more quickly, but which is even more unlikely to come about, I am afraid, is compulsory group therapy for all prospective teachers, concentrating on honest recognition of who they are and what their dominant drives and styles of behavior are, and bringing them to see what they must do in order to like themselves better and to function more freely both in their chosen field and as persons in general.

Perhaps a continuing discussion of the problem in *Educational Leadership* would bring to light some practical solutions.

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## The Supervisor: New Demands □ New Dimensions

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Harold T. Shafer, Chairman □ Edited by William H. Lucio

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