

# The Human Aspect of Administration<sup>1</sup>

ARTHUR W. COMBS\*

TEN years ago at the University of Florida we started looking at the question of how you can tell the difference between good practitioners and poor ones in the various helping professions. By the helping professions, I mean those which have the problem of trying to do something to be helpful to other people. This includes teaching, social work, psychiatry, clinical psychology, counseling, nursing, and the like. We began our studies looking for the answer to the question, "What makes an effective or ineffective worker in these various fields?"

At first we said, "Well, maybe the difference is in what they know," so we began a series of researches designed to look at the differences between the good ones and the poor ones, in these various professions. We have now completed studies on good and poor elementary teachers, good and poor college teachers, good and poor counselors, and, most recently, we have looked at the problem of good and poor Episcopal priests.

The thing we find about these people is that the good ones are alike and the poor ones are alike no matter which of these professions they belong to, but we did not know that at first. We thought at first we could tell the difference on the basis of what they knew, so we gave these people tests to see what they

knew about the helping professions, and we found *both* the good ones and the bad ones all know what they *ought* to do! You cannot tell the difference between them on the basis of knowledge of what they ought to do!

Next, we came across Fred Fiedler's research in which he found that among counselors of different persuasions, the good ones all have the same general ideas about what a good relationship ought to be like. He also found another startling thing; that the man in the street could describe a good helping relationship about as well as the experts, so we were right back where we started from. We were forced to the conclusion that you cannot tell the difference on the basis of what helpers know. I guess all of us are familiar with that. We have all had professors at one time or another who knew their subject but could not teach worth sour apples. The mere fact of knowing a topic is no guarantee that one can teach.

Next, we thought if you cannot tell the difference on the basis of knowledge maybe you can tell the difference on the basis of what they do. So we began to look at the methods which these people use. When you do that, you do not find any differences in methods either! An interesting study done by Ellena and others for the National Education

<sup>1</sup> Based on an address to the 645th meeting of the Colorado Schoolmasters, Greeley, Colorado, January 30, 1970.

\* Arthur W. Combs, Professor of Education, University of Florida, Gainesville

Association reviewed all the research available on good teaching. They were unable to discover a method of teaching which can be clearly shown to be associated with either good or bad teachers. So there we were. You cannot tell the difference on the basis of what they know or do. What, then, is the difference?

### **Instantaneous Response**

We began to look at the problem in a different way. We finally came to the conclusion that *these professions are all dependent upon instantaneous reactions*. If you are a teacher, counselor, pastor, or social worker you must have instantaneous response to whatever happens. When the child says something you have to say something back. The client says to his counselor, "I'm thinking of getting a divorce." He stops and the counselor has to reply and he has to do it instantly. That leaves us with the problem of how can you have an instantaneous response and also be sure it is a good one? Here we came to understand the problem a little differently as we drew an analogy with a giant computer.

A giant computer takes in bushels and bushels of information from outside as fast as you can feed it in. All this information coming in from outside is combined with the information already in its memory bank and gives, almost instantaneously, the best answer for that data which it can. Now that is what a human being does, too. In the computer, what determines the answer is the formula we have put into the computer in the first place, what we call the program. What is it that makes the difference in a human being? We think that, in a human being, what makes the difference is the belief system the person holds. Especially this has to do with what you believe is important.

Here I would like to tell a story to illustrate my point. In one of the schools in the outskirts of Atlanta a very lovely girl was teaching first grade. This young woman had beautiful long hair which she was accustomed to wearing in a pony tail down to the middle of her back. She wore her hair this way the first three days of the school year.

Then, on Thursday, she decided to do it differently. She did it up in a bun on top of her head, and went to teach her first grade. Well, one of her little boys came, looked in her room, and did not recognize his teacher. That sometimes happens when a woman changes her hairdo. So the little boy was lost, all by himself out in the hall.

Soon, along came a supervisor who said, "What's the trouble?" He said, "I can't find my teacher." The supervisor then asked, "What's your teacher's name?" Well, he did not know, so she said, "What room are you in?" but he did not know that either. He had looked in there and it was not the right place. So she said, "Well, come on. Let's see if we can find her," and they started down the hall together, the little boy and the supervisor, hand in hand. She opened the doors of several rooms without much luck. Finally, they came to the room where this young woman was teaching. As they opened the door the young teacher turned, saw the supervisor with the little boy standing in the doorway, and said, "Why, Joey, it's so good to see you, son. We were wondering where you were. Do come in. We've missed you so." The little boy pulled out of the supervisor's hand and threw himself into the teacher's arms. She gave him a hug, a pat on the fanny, and he trotted to his seat.

While the supervisor was telling me this story, she and I were riding along in a car. She said to me, "Art, I said a prayer for that teacher, she knew what was important. She thought little boys were important!" We got to kicking this around; suppose she had not thought little boys were important, suppose she thought supervisors were important? In that case she would have said, "Why, good morning, Miss K., we've been hoping you would come and see us, haven't we, boys and girls?" And the little boy would have been ignored. Or she might have thought that the lesson was important. In that case she would have said, "Well, Joey, for heaven's sakes, where have you been? Come in here and get to work." Or she might have thought that the discipline was important. In that case she would have said, "Joey, you know very well when you are late you must go to the office

and get a permit. Now run right down there and get it." But she didn't. She behaved in terms of what she believed was important, and so it is for each of us.

"What you think is important" sounds like a very simple idea, but it turns out to be absolutely basic to the whole question of what makes a person an effective helper. Applied to the field of administration, this is perhaps the most outstanding single reason for the failure of administrators to carry out their job, the failure to clarify in their own minds what is really important. What happens is they get on a kind of merry-go-round in which, because they don't know what is important, everything is important. When everything is important you have to do everything. Then people see you doing everything and they *expect* you to do everything and that keeps you so busy you don't have time to think about what is important! Do you recognize that merry-go-round? I have been on it a good many times in my lifetime and the only way off is to discover what is *really* important.

In the helping professions we have come to understand that what makes the difference between the good ones and the poor ones in all the professions that we have been exploring has to do with what the good ones believe is important and what the poor ones believe is important. It is there that you need to look for your own success, and it is there you need to look if you would like to know which of your teachers are the good ones and which are the poor ones.

We now understand that effective teaching or effective helping in any of these professions is really a question, not of using particular methods or having particular knowledge; it has to do with how you have learned to use yourself. We have called this the "self as instrument" concept. The problem has to do with the message conveyed by what you do.

We have just finished several more studies on student teachers and also with black and white juvenile delinquents. Out of these studies let us take a look at some of the things we found out about how these people perceive the world in which they live.

## From the Other Person's Viewpoint

First we found this: all of the good helpers in all the professions we looked at are people *who typically approach their problems from the point of view of the other person*. They are always deeply sensitive to how things look from the other fellow's point of view. This is what is sometimes called the internal as opposed to the external frame of reference. Sometimes it is also called "empathy." It has to do with the capacity to put yourself in the other person's shoes and see how things look from his point of view. Let me give you an illustration of what I mean.

Not long ago I was sitting with a supervisor and a teacher as they were talking about a little boy. The teacher was saying to the supervisor something like this, "You know, he can do it. I know he can do it. I tell him, 'Jimmy, it is easy, son, you can do it'; but he won't even try." The supervisor said to this young teacher, "Honey, don't *ever* tell a child something is easy." You know, I pricked up my ears at this because I have done that and I bet you have, too. I said to the supervisor, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, look at it from the child's point of view. If you tell him it is easy and he can't do it, the only conclusion he can come to is that he must be stupid. If you tell him it is easy and he *can* do it, now look what you have done. You have taken all the glory out of it. There is no glory in doing anything that someone has said is easy." She turned to the teacher and said, "Honey, tell him it's hard and you know it is but you're pretty sure he can do it. Then, if he can't do it, he hasn't lost face; and if he can do it, what glory there is for him." This is what I mean about the kind of sensitivity that makes it possible to see how things look from the other person's point of view.

What we do not understand about others' views produces most of our failures in human communication. This is so when we are talking about individuals, about nations, or about groups. Being aware of how things look from the other person's point of view makes all the difference in the likelihood of our own success in dealing with them. Without this we cannot communicate with each

other. We pass each other like ships in the night.

Some counselors do this often. The counselor tells the client what to do and the client does not understand it. Of course, he cannot do it and afterward the counselor washes his hands in pious self-righteousness and says, "Well, I told you what to do." We have a saying among counselor trainers that whenever you tell a person something to do you have assumed responsibility for helping him do it. A variation applies to the problem of administration. In our research we find the good helpers are concerned with people and the poor ones are concerned with things, with regulations, order, and procedures.

Let me give you an illustration: Some years ago I was being taken on a tour of a school by the superintendent. As we went around through the building, he showed me all the marvelous things they had. Obviously, he was very proud of his building. We went through everything, the school cafeteria, the bus loading area, the works. Back in his office I said, "Paul, this is a beautiful school but you know you didn't show me a classroom. He said, "So I didn't." He called his secretary and said, "Take Mr. Combs down to room 123."

I went to room 123 for a half an hour and came back to see the superintendent. From what I have told you, you have some idea of what he thinks is important. While I was sitting there in his office, in came the driver of one of the buses with a little boy in one hand and a broken arm off one of the seats in the other. Somebody had pushed somebody and somebody else pushed somebody else and the little boy got pushed against the arm. The arm broke and here he was. Knowing what this superintendent believed to be important, how would you predict he would behave? You are right, he got terribly angry. He behaved as though the little boy had broken *his* arm, and in a psychological sense the little boy had.

A great many of the difficulties that administrators get into are caused by the fact that they are too much concerned with the problems of things and not enough concerned for the problems of people. Let me tell you

one other story to illustrate: Visiting a school not too long ago, I wandered into a classroom and sat down at the back of the room. It was clear as soon as I sat down that I had made a mistake because the teacher was having a very hard time. There were only five minutes to go until the end of the day, so I figured I would make less disturbance by sitting it out than by getting up and walking out.

When the bell rang and the kids left, I walked up to the teacher's desk intent upon saying something like, "I know how it is to have a hard day. Man, I have had them myself." But just before I got there a little boy came in, handed her a note. She took one look at the note, slammed it down on the desk, and exploded right before my eyes. She said, "How can anyone be so impossibly picayune?" and away we went, as she took off on her principal.

I stood there and listened. Looking down on the desk to see what was the cause of all this I saw the note, and this is what it said: "At the end of each day all window shades should be placed at the half-drawn position." Signed: "The Principal." Now I know what happened. This was a brand new school and the principal had gone out to the Rotary Club for lunch. On the way back he came riding up to his nice new building and the window shades were all up and down. So he thought, "Wouldn't it be nice at the end of the day to have all the shades the same?" And he went into his office and wrote a memorandum, of course! He was concerned about people very little and about things very much. This distinction can make the difference between the good ones and the poor ones and it shows in spite of you.

## What People Are Like

A second major area in which we found differences about helping people had to do with the question of *what they believe people are like*. It makes a lot of difference what you think people are like. All through history what we have been doing to people is dependent on what we believe people are like. For example, when we believed that sickness was a question of bad blood, we used to bleed

people and sometimes we bled them to death. When we believed insanity was "being possessed of the devil," what we did sometimes was literally to try to kick the devil out of a person. Our behavior with respect to people is always a question of what we believe about them. And this is what we found in our work with the good helpers and poor helpers.

The good helpers believe that people are able instead of unable, dependable rather than undependable, friendly rather than unfriendly, worthy rather than unworthy. It makes a lot of difference whether you believe people are able or unable, especially if you are a teacher. If you do not believe that children are able, you do not dare let them! If you do not believe people are able, you do not dare trust them. If you do not believe people are capable of taking advantage of effective education, then you do not vote for the school bonds.

Let me use this example also to show you why you cannot tell the difference between the good ones and the poor ones on the basis of the methods which they use. Take two teachers, each of whom believes children are "able." Now one of these teachers, because she believes the children are able, makes them work real hard because she *knows they can* and the message that gets through is, "She thinks I can." She is tough. Here is another teacher who also believes the children are able, but she says to them, "You know that is an interesting idea, why don't you take the rest of the afternoon to work on it by yourself?" She is a softy. Now here are two widely different methods, both of them used by good teachers. The important question is not what they are doing but the *message that is conveyed* by what they are doing, and the message comes from their beliefs, not what they did. In each case the same message gets through, "She thinks I can, she has confidence in me. She believes I am able." The important question we have to look at is the message that is conveyed by what people do rather than the things which they say.

There is an old Indian saying, "What you do speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you say." And that is true; the beliefs you have betray you in spite of yourself. Not long ago



## CURRENT SOURCE BOOK Self Paced Instruction

WHERE TO FIND THE INDEPENDENT  
PROGRESS TEXTS & MULTIMEDIA IN-  
STRUCTION TO BEST SERVE YOUR  
STUDENTS

Annotated listings of programmed & other self study or self paced instruction, multimedia systems & equipment assisting instruction.

**Use this book to help students help themselves.**

**PROGRAMMED LEARNING: A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PROGRAMS & PRESENTATION DEVICES**, Fourth Edition compiled by Carl H. Hendershot, Ed. D.

Basic Bibliography & Supplements through late 1970, approx. 700 pp. Two volume set—\$27.00

Order on approval or request brochure from

**HENDERSHOT LEARNING CONSULTANTS**

Dept. L, 4114 Ridgewood Dr., Bay City, Mich. 48706

*Inquire regarding consulting services for selecting, using, or writing self paced instruction.*

I was listening to a psychiatrist who was talking about the difficulties he had with some kinds of patients who came to his office. "I don't seem to be getting the kind of results that you people are getting," he said. "I believe in the same kind of therapy that you do. I believe in the dignity and integrity of my clients and I believe that the client ought to be helped to find his own answers," and so on. Then, when he was through with all this, he said, "I have great difficulty in *making my patients understand*." His real belief shows in spite of the fact that he knows the right words to say. His behavior is a function of the belief system which he has.

In research after research the good helpers all turn out to believe people are able and dependable and friendly and worthy and dignified and persons of integrity and value. The poor ones come out on the other side of that picture. You might ask yourself, do I really believe that people are really dependable? I would remind you that the basic principle of democracy says, "If men are free they can

find their own best ways," which is a way of saying that when people are free we believe they are able to make their own decisions. Except most of us do not really believe that. We say, "Yes, I think that's true, when people are free they can find their own best ways except—but not in this case." We pull the string on it.

*Summerhill* is a book that has upset a great many people in education and elsewhere. Here is a book written about a school in England run for 40 years on the fundamental principle that children should be allowed to make all decisions affecting themselves. Any decision that affected the child and nobody else was made by the child and Neill, the headmaster, went all out with this, *all the way*. For instance, he even let children decide whether to go to class or not and some did not go for five years! He carried it that far.

Now, I do not approve of everything about this school, but I was fascinated in reading this book. I was struck by this: that in 40 years under this kind of treatment, all the things that you and I think might happen if we let children decide, did not happen! Despite the fact that some children did not go to class for five years, they had to meet the national requirements for graduation, and they did before they left. Here is a man who dared to let children decide, and they did not let him down.

## How People See Themselves

A third major area characteristic of helpers has to do with how they see themselves. *They see themselves in positive ways*. They have good self-concepts, as we call it these days. They see themselves as people who are liked and wanted, acceptable and able and dignified and worthy, these kinds of things. The poor helpers, on the other hand, see themselves as unliked, unwanted, unacceptable, unable, and undignified, these kinds of things. Apparently, having a positive feeling about one's self makes one more likely to be effective in the things he does. People who feel that they are adequate approach their problems with confidence, assured that they

are going to be successful. As a consequence, they are likely to be. An interesting research in the past few years has been that of Rosenthal on what he called the "self-fulfilling prophecy." In Rosenthal's experiment, he gave children a test which he said was an intelligence test. After the test had been given, he took 20 percent of the children's names at random and told the teacher something like, "These children whose names I am giving you are children who, according to our test, are bound to have an extraordinary growth spurt in their intelligence this year." And sure enough they did!

What you believe when working with people makes a great deal of difference. This is why a counselor makes such a to-do about having an air of being unshockable. With a person who is sick and looking for the slightest sign that you do not really believe what you are spouting, it is necessary to believe in yourself. We are discovering that you cannot accept other people unless you can accept yourself. People who do not like themselves are not likely to be able to accept others very well either. Research after research demonstrates that self-acceptance is related to the acceptance of others.

## With Respect to Purposes

In the fourth area of our research we find a *great deal of difference between people with respect to their purposes*. Nobody, as Freud told us, ever does anything unless he wants to do it. Everybody always does what he needs to do. Everybody behaves in terms of his purposes. What we have to look for in the good helper and the poor helper is the nature of his purpose. For example, my writing this paper has to do with my belief about society's purpose. It has to do with what I believe about the purpose of the public schools, it has to do with what I believe about my purpose as a college professor, it has to do with what I believe about my purpose as a person. One of my purposes is, let's face it, I enjoy communicating. Each of us behaves in terms of the purposes which he has and you can clearly tell the difference between the good helper and the poor helper on the

# Instructor

Magazine and INSTRUCTOR Curriculum Materials for the elementary teacher . . . creating units of instruction . . . planning educational research in current curricula . . . giving individualized instruction as practiced in today's school.

The Instructor Publications, Inc.  Dansville, N.Y. 14457

basis of these purposes. The good helper's purposes are likely to be altruistic rather than narcissistic. He is more likely to be concerned with larger purposes rather than smaller purposes. He is more concerned with setting people free rather than controlling them. In this sense it may be that one of the worst things that ever happened to teaching is the teacher-plan book. The teacher works hard to make out his plan and this plan has to be put into operation no matter what. I think, for instance, of the box some teachers were caught in on the day John Kennedy was shot. Thousands of teachers were saying, "Now we aren't going to talk about that. It's time for history!" Good helpers are always concerned with setting the people they are working with free to do something, and the poor ones are trying to find ways of controlling them.

The purposes of the good helpers tend to be larger purposes and the kinds of purposes that the poor helpers have tend to be smaller ones. If you ask the good teacher what her purposes are, she gives you some glorious generality. You ask the poor teacher what her purpose is and she says, "I have to get through this lesson in the next 15 minutes." Larger or smaller goals make all the difference in whether or not a person can honestly be flexible.

I think, for instance, of standing in a museum not long ago, watching a group of children and their teacher; the children were standing there before a great big painting. They were standing there pop-eyed, staring at the painting, and the teacher was standing

to one side saying, "If you kids don't hurry up you aren't going to see anything!" I think also of the class I was in last summer, a class for children who were having difficulty in communication skills. They were going to summer school because they are not doing very well. The teacher asked a question and one little boy raised his hand, all excited, as he started to tell about the matter. He wanted to tell it, but the teacher said, "That's enough, Jimmy, I'll tell it." So she took over and told us all about it. This was a course in communication skills for children who were having difficulty in communicating!

## Do the Methods Fit?

The last thing we found in our research that makes a big difference has to do with *methods*. No doubt you will want to say here, "I think you said in the beginning that it had nothing to do with methods." Well, it doesn't, in the sense of "right" methods and "wrong" methods. We are finding out that what makes the difference is not *what* methods are used, but *do the methods used fit?* The important question about methods is not which is the right one and which is the wrong one, but which is the proper fit. It has to do with *authenticity*, the thing young people are demanding these days. The question is, what is the right method *for me?* We begin to understand that methods are like the clothes you wear. You would not look well in my clothes and I would not look well in yours. Each of us has to wear what becomes him.

So it is with methods. The important question for a teachers college is not that you teach people *how to teach*, but you help people to discover *their ways of teaching*.

The matter of authenticity has to do also with the question of visibility. Good helpers are all people who make themselves visible, while poor helpers are people who are always hiding themselves somewhere so you cannot ever locate them. I do not mean physically, I mean in terms of the messages which they expose. Jourard calls this "self-disclosure." This is the problem of visibility, of expectancy. We can only create in another person authentic expectancy if we are willing to disclose ourselves to him. This is where many an administrator makes a very serious mistake. Instead of making himself visible, he often makes people guess who he is, what he is, where he is, what he thinks, and what he wants. You cannot carry on a human interaction on that basis.

Let us take the case of a child in a teacher's classroom. After the child has lived with the teacher for six months, he knows what she is like. But suppose the teacher says, "I am not like that at all." This child is now in an impossible position. If the child treats the teacher the way he *knows* she is, she rejects it. If he tries to treat her the way she *says* she is, he can do it only as long as he can act it, as long as he can keep his mind on it. But he cannot keep his mind on it very long; and the minute he forgets he falls back on what she is really like, and he is back in the soup again.

There is only one thing you can do with a teacher like that, and that is to stay as far away from her as possible. That is precisely what happens to administrators also who do not make themselves visible to the people they are working with. When I go to a convention of administrators, one of the things I hear them complaining about most is that administrating is such a lonesome job. Now I suspect that one reason that it is lonesome is that they are not making themselves visible. People are staying away from them because they are afraid of them.

Well, these are some of the things we are finding out in our research, some of the

things that make the difference between good helpers and poor helpers. We are currently engaged in trying to apply some of these things in a teachers college to produce better teachers. It means, for example, we pay less attention to methods and much more attention to what young teachers are thinking, seeing, and believing about themselves, about other people, and about their purposes, and that they learn how to become sensitive people able to see things from the other person's point of view.

I think we have hardly scratched the surface in what this means for the education of all people in the helping professions. In time I suspect we may be able to do something to help administrators with their problem of evaluating teachers. Right now we get a letter a week from some administrator saying, "I heard about that test that tells the difference between good and poor teachers. Please send me copies for all my staff as quickly as possible." So we write back, "Thank you. We are not interested in measuring the goodness or the poorness of your teachers at this point. We are only interested in discovering the difference between the good ones and the poor ones so that we can go about changing our colleges of education to produce better ones. Some day we may be in a better position to create the kind of tests you want. But we have not got to it yet."

I find this research very exciting. It calls for a different view of the nature of a professional worker. Rather than being a person possessing a particular volume of knowledge or behaving in a particular way, it has to do with how well a person has learned to use himself as an instrument to carry out his own and society's purposes. That means that teachers living next door to each other can teach quite differently and it is quite all right. It says to teachers and administrators, "It is all right to be me!" And that must come as a refreshing breeze to some of the young people we have been desperately trying to change into somebody else's image for so long with so little result. I find these results exciting, and I hope that over the years to come we may have more to report to you. □

Copyright © 1970 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.