

# BEHAVIORAL OBJECTIVES? NO!

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**T**HE use of behavioral objectives in instruction is characteristic of a culture which sets a high value on efficiency and productivity. Such a culture seeks to measure accomplishment in standard units. Theoretical justification for behavioral objectives comes from behavioral psychology (Kendler, 1959, p. 179). This type of psychology defines learning as behavior that is changed in conformity with predicted, measurable outcomes and with little or no measurable "waste."

Teacher education institutions that advocate the use of behavioral objectives transmit methods of instruction that are standardized, empirically tested, and aim at measurable results. Such methods work best in school systems that are highly sensitive to the economic and behavioral determinants of educational practice.

## Analysis

This approach to instruction rests on assumptions about human behavior that are reductionist, deterministic, and physicalist. It is opposed to the view that learning is self-directed, unstructured, and in large part unpredictable.

Advocates of the behavioral approach deny these two points (Popham, 1968; Block,

1971). Behavior, they say, covers a wide range of experience, including creativity, imagination, even serendipity. Nor need objectives be fixed; they can be modified, adjusted to individuals, even abandoned in favor of others (Baker, 1968; Block, 1971, p. 291). But if so, if the terms "behavior" and "objectives" can be made to mean many different things, what things could they not mean? If a term is to have a clear-cut meaning, we must at least be able to define its contradictory.<sup>1</sup>

Many advocates now speak of "instructional" rather than "behavioral" objectives (Mager, 1962). Nevertheless, one's notion of instruction depends on assumptions about the nature of the mind and of the persons involved in the instructional process (Nod-

<sup>1</sup> The meaning of "behavior" becomes more complicated still when, in relation to learning, it is stratified according to dispositions. Learning defined as changed behavior then includes changes in dispositions to behave. See: James E. McClellan, "B. F. Skinner's Philosophy of Human Nature," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 4: 307-32; 1966; and L. B. Daniels, "Behavior Strata and Learning," *Educational Theory* 20 (4): 377-86; Fall 1970. A satisfactory theory of human behavior has yet to be proposed.

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dings, 1971, p. 40). The new term may imply a more modest approach to instruction and force us to concentrate on matters more central to education. Yet learning still is conceived as a series of measurable responses to carefully prearranged stimuli (Steg, 1971). The sameness of individuals is judged to matter more than their differences; schooling is systems-oriented; adjustment to the curriculum is presupposed; replication is prized; and computer-assisted instruction is cordially welcomed (Broudy, 1970, p. 49; Dreyfus, 1967, pp. 13-33).

It is claimed that, using behavioral objectives, a teacher can teach an entire class and cater to individual differences as well (Block, 1971). He can do so, it is said, either by adapting predetermined objectives to individuals or by composing a special set of objectives for each member of the class. However, this proud claim entails that the teacher must (a) handle a staggering number of objectives,<sup>2</sup> (b) accept a scientific theory of human behavior which tends to exclude individualized (idiosyncratic) learning, and (c) act on the false assumption that learning, knowing, and behaving are the same process.

As regards (c), not only are there many kinds of learning, pacing being only one of them, there are also many kinds of knowing

<sup>2</sup> Behavioral objectivists maintain that the number of objectives for a single course could run as high as two thousand, if the teacher sought to cover everything. If there were 30 students in a class, the number of individual objectives would amount to as many as sixty thousand. The high school teacher of 150 students would be handling millions of objectives—conceivably. Given the behaviorists' claim that behavior includes everything that can occur in a learning situation, these figures are plausible enough. Block (1971, p. 292) correctly observes that the computer has a tremendous capacity to tailor-make programs. Item banks could be constructed and stored. Yet this of course would require that the teacher specify goals in appropriate computer terms.

and behaving. These processes, psychologically speaking, are separate and distinct. The subject is too complex to be argued here, but this much may be said: Learning leads to no particular behavior. It is impossible to coordinate learning or knowing with behaving, because there is no theory which interrelates these phenomena, and consequently there is no way of understanding how their putative instances might be brought into relation in actual practice (Deese, 1969, 516-17). To use behavioral objectives in individualized instruction is to overlook the essential differences between individual learning, knowing, and behaving.

Behavioral objectivists are apt to be scornful of teachers who refuse to adopt clearly specified goals. This refusal, we are told, is partly responsible for the "present failure" of American education (Popham, 1968). I do not see how this could be shown to be the case. I am still less impressed by the claim that if we adopted behavioral objectives, we would solve most of our instructional problems.

All depends on what one considers good teaching and learning to be. Teachers might be held more "strictly" accountable, learning might be evaluated more "reliably," and parents might perceive their children's achievements more "accurately"—but only if teaching and learning are drastically circumscribed. Here is the heart of the matter. Undoubtedly, the process of education can be more tightly controlled, most simply by giving everyone less freedom of choice. This suits the behavioral objectivist, because his philosophy is one of control, but it does not suit educators of other persuasions.

## Speculation

Under what circumstances may schools be said to "need" behavioral objectives? For one thing, such objectives can be used to define and measure accomplishment in those basic intellectual abilities that all students need if they are to pass successfully from one learning experience to another. Failure by a student to acquire a basic skill may, if uncorrected, hinder all his future learning

and so his whole attitude toward education. The young man who desires to be a master mechanic must first acquire the skills of an apprentice, and then of a journeyman. He cannot acquire them unless he can read, write, and compute. A long history of painful, unsuccessful learning experiences can severely damage a student's self-concept, his personality development, and his entire life style (Block, 1971, pp. 297-98).

That many of our youth are damaged in this way, especially in the elementary school, is distressingly obvious. The school has a clear responsibility to ensure that *all* students succeed in learning basic skills. In order to meet this responsibility, the school must possess a schedule of clearly specified objectives for all students to achieve, together with adequate instruments for measuring what is achieved. Every student must know concretely and specifically what he is accomplishing relative to (a) what may rea-

sonably be expected of him, and (b) what his peers are achieving.

### "Specified" Objectives

The objectives I suggest are "specified" rather than "behavioral." They are chosen, or specified, by the school according to its own philosophy of education, and they are specified only for certain subject matter which the school considers basic.<sup>3</sup> Certain specific content (or skills) could be required of all students at certain levels, and the students could be tested on how well they had acquired it. It would be the sort of content

<sup>3</sup> I agree with Maccia (1962) and Steg (1971) that although some learning goals can be specified, we should give wide play to the discovery impulse in learning. Much knowledge may be set out for the student to acquire. Yet the teacher must also open the gates for students both to acquire knowledge that interests them personally and to inquire beyond the knowledge we now have.

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Yet at another level, a level at which standardization is difficult, impossible, or undesirable, the individual teacher should specify objectives, to be achieved by either the individual student or groups of students, in accordance with (a) a theory of knowledge and value adopted by the teacher himself, and (b) the talents and choices of the student. Take two subjects where rigorous evaluation is quite impossible, art and music. The teacher might perhaps stipulate that a certain number and kind of songs be learned, that at least one song be composed, and that a symphony be analyzed. He might also stipulate that a number of drawings be made, and that one essay be written on a painting and another on an art movement such as dadaism or impressionism. In teaching these and other subjects, the teacher should be guided by a defensible philosophy and psychology of learning and instruction.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, however, it is not the schools but the teachers who must decide what objectives should be specified, and they must do so as individuals, taking their students into consideration. They must therefore acquire the knowledge and skills that are needed to specify educational objectives and evaluate the results obtained. Behavioral objectivists can help by providing models to spur investigation. Yet if these models are adopted uncritically by the rank and file of teachers, education will decline into an inauthentic and spiritless conditioning.

For, properly conceived, education is a dialogue between persons in the community of the school, a dialogue in which the teacher encourages the student to enter into acts of

<sup>4</sup> On learning goals and knowledge considerations, see Maccia (1962) and Steg (1971). Maccia shows that knowledge is an open system, and Steg warns against using objectives as anything more than a means for focusing purposes: "They must never become the overriding concern of education." Although both writers deal primarily with teaching machines, they are concerned with means by which students can create knowledge (and values, for that matter) instead of simply absorbing it. Learning, says Steg, is "the possibility of going outside a frame of activity" (p. 49). "We must consider logical goodness," says Maccia, "in relation to [new] knowing as well as in relation to knowledge" (p. 238).

learning that fulfill him personally. This is education at its finest, and the program of the behavioral objectivist has very little place in it.

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