

The Role of Behavioral Objectives: A Response to A. W. Combs

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ALTHOUGH the matter of instructional objectives is seen as less controversial than in the past (Popham, 1972a), there still exists a considerable amount of debate; and position papers expressing diametrically opposite conclusions (for example, Gagné, 1972; Kneller, 1972) continue to be published. In an attempt to clarify some of the issues underlying the debate, Smith (1972) has suggested that the content of the objective (process vs. product) and the manner in which it is stated (precise vs. vague) may be functions of the specific situation under consideration.

A recent booklet entitled *Educational Accountability: Beyond Behavioral Objectives* (Combs, 1972) appears to continue the discussion of the role of behavioral objectives. The purpose of the present article is to react to the arguments presented in that booklet.

In general, the ideas expounded in this ASCD booklet do little, if anything, to clarify the issues. From one point of view, a very limited and biased delineation of educational accountability is presented. This article seeks to correct that imbalance by suggesting other references which will assist the student of accountability in obtaining a broader view of the subject. A synopsis of the points made by Combs is presented, and each of these

arguments against behavioral objectives is discussed with respect to other literature. This discussion is followed by general criticisms of *Educational Accountability*, with an attempt to outline a more productive approach to the topic of behavioral objectives and their relationship to educational accountability.

Against Behavioral Objectives

Six major points were identified in *Educational Accountability* (Combs, 1972) which seem concerned with the limitations and inadequacies of a behavioral objectives approach:

1. Behavioral objectives are of limited use and must be confined to the acquisition of precisely defined skills (pp. 1, 6).
2. Behavioral objectives represent a symptomatic approach to changing behavior (p. 7).
3. Behavioral objectives stifle the creativity of the classroom teacher (p. 8).
4. Behavioral objectives cause the teacher to lose sight of the general goals of education (p. 9).
5. Behavioral objectives are undemocratic (p. 8).
6. Behavioral objectives demoralize teachers (p. 10).

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The first objection to behavioral objectives has been treated extensively in the literature (Eisner, 1969; Ojemann, 1969; Popham, 1968). While the "limited use" position may be relevant in describing the manner in which behavioral objectives have been used in the past, the argument is irrelevant with respect to the potential use of behavioral objectives.

Of particular interest when considering the "limited use" position is a study reported by Ivey, Rollin, Cooper, Schleiderer, and Gluckstern (1970), in which a behavioral objectives approach to training preservice teachers in human relations skills was evaluated. Starting with a definition of existential intentionality (May, 1969), a module-type curriculum using behavioral objectives was developed and evaluated. While the statistical analysis was inappropriate, a reanalysis of the data confirmed most of the results. In essence, a behavioral approach to humanism seemed quite promising.

Also of interest is a comprehensive bibliography compiled by Pouilliotte and Peters (1971). Among the 962 titles related to behavioral objectives are contained 20 references concerned specifically with the performing arts. These references would suggest that some persons engaged in subject areas characterized by a high degree of creativity and individualized behavior are attempting to deal constructively with behavioral objectives.

On the basis of the cited literature, Combs' conclusion that behavioral objectives are not appropriate for the "more complex functions" (p. 6) seems rather inaccurate.

The second argument, describing the behavioral objectives approach as a symptomatic approach which does not deal with the causes of behavior, may be original with Combs. However, in the general psychological literature, proponents of psychoanalysis have faulted "behaviorism" for its superficial approach. Suffice it to say that in view of the complexity of human behavior, most

modern-day behavioral scientists have given up the quest for causal relationships and now search for functional relationships among variables (Russell, 1917; Toulmin, 1953; Travers, 1969; Kibler, Barker, and Miles, 1970).

The third argument presented in *Educational Accountability*, that a behavioral objectives approach stifles classroom creativity, is perhaps the most common argument raised against behavioral objectives. Other writers (Eisner, 1967; Hoetker, 1969; Kibler *et al.*, 1970) have taken the position that all the objectives of a teaching episode cannot be specified in advance. Popham (1968) has presented the other side of this issue, viewing the classroom teacher's behavior as a means to an end. Popham concluded that the use of behavioral objectives may help keep the teacher oriented toward the attainment of worthwhile outcomes.

The fourth major point against behavioral objectives is an extension of the third argument, just discussed. Combs (1972) has claimed that the specificity of behavioral objectives tends to narrow the purpose of teaching because such specificity makes one lose sight of the general goals of education. This objection, too, has been raised in the literature (Eisner, 1967, 1969; Ojemann, 1969). In dealing with this criticism of behavioral objectives, it may be helpful to maintain a distinction between "specifying in advance," and "specificity." Even so, Vargas (1972) has maintained that specificity is not synonymous with triviality. Indeed, many writers (Popham, 1968, 1969, 1972b; Hoetker, 1969; Lawrence, 1971) have presented cases for the nontriviality of behavioral outcomes.

The fifth argument, that behavioral objectives are undemocratic, seems to confound the considerations of personal meaning and of democracy. Several authors (Ojemann, 1968, 1969; Kibler *et al.*, 1970) have treated the matter of personal meaning in relation to behavioral objectives. The validity of the characterization of behavioral objectives as undemocratic would seem to depend upon the definition of "democracy" employed. A careful examination of Combs' use of the word

suggests that he is using the term to describe the type of situation in which the child is free to determine his own activity. However, if one adopts a broader definition of "democracy," specifying a democracy as a system built upon ". . . a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences" (Dewey, 1961, p. 84), then the notion of behavioral objectives does not necessarily exclude a democratic environment.

The last major argument against behavioral objectives is that their use demoralizes teachers, supposedly because there are too many objectives required for each teacher. This position was supported with neither empirical data nor convincing rhetoric. Many writers have treated the problem of the number of objectives necessary (Eisner, 1967, 1969; Kneller, 1972; Vargas, 1972). It would seem that the number of objectives necessary is a function of the degree of specificity of the objectives. Hoetker (1969) has suggested that the number of objectives necessary could be substantially reduced if narrowly stated objectives are avoided.

The six arguments discussed here were presented in *Educational Accountability* as "evidence" of the dehumanizing effects that the use of behavioral objectives has upon the process of education. In a global reaction to Combs' position, one must admit that some interesting points regarding behavioral objectives have been raised. However, one cannot help but notice the lack of reference to any previous discussion of these issues. Indeed, the booklet is not addressed to the issue implied in the title: the legitimacy of using behavioral objectives in systems of educational accountability. In addition, the positions expressed in the booklet appear to be in opposition to the sparse empirical evidence.

At this point, it is appropriate to quote Hoetker (1969), a self-declared humanist, who has characterized most humanist attacks on behaviorists as ". . . rousing and witty and satisfying, but they are too often snobbish and self-serving, too often empirically ungrounded, too often attacks on 'science' rather than arguments to the issues."

General Criticisms

Several major criticisms of *Educational Accountability* seem warranted. First, the booklet suffers from a shortage of relevant references. Not only has Combs neglected the literature supporting his arguments against behavioral objectives, but by using Skinner (1971) as the only reference for a discussion of behaviorism and accountability, he has also failed to present a representative description of the behavioristic position. Work by other current behaviorists was not included and the position as presented by Combs, while useful as a "straw man" to attack, hardly does justice to a reasonable and well-documented approach to psychology. While placing the behaviorists in the position of being against inference permits a clear distinction between the behaviorist and humanist positions, such a statement does not coincide with the position taken by a number of modern behaviorists.

A second criticism of the booklet by Combs relates to an apparent confusion about the differences between "accountability" and "behavioral objectives." Although the presentation was entitled *Educational Accountability*, a major portion of the booklet was focused almost entirely on behavioral objectives. Thus, one might infer that Combs views these two terms as equivalent. While behavioral objectives may be a part of a program of educational accountability, the latter term is typically used in a much broader sense than is the former. As a result of lack of differentiation between the two terms, a reader not acquainted with the literature on educational accountability may draw some inaccurate inferences from the presentation by Combs.

A third criticism of *Educational Accountability* is that it appears to equate "measurable" with "narrow." Although there is no direct quotation to this effect, a reading of the booklet makes it quite clear that anything measurable must necessarily be narrow, such as specific skills and facts. In contrast, Sanders (1966) has provided an entire book for teachers on how to implement the various cognitive levels described by Bloom,

Englehart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl (1956). Sanders dealt with the higher cognitive levels of the taxonomy, and offered specific procedures for the measurement of these behaviors. Thus, to relegate things measurable to things specific and limited is inconsistent with the literature on educational accountability as well as with a rather extensive body of research.

There is one criticism remaining which may be directed toward the entire booklet. Several authorities would agree that one criterion of judging the contribution to science of any endeavor is the degree to which the work may be subjected to public scrutiny (Bridgman, 1927; Stevens, 1939; Marx, 1963). Measured against this criterion, the alternatives to behavioral objectives outlined in *Educational Accountability* do not warrant being considered as scientific contributions to the understanding of human behavior. The booklet relies upon implicit definitions and upon constructs which defy public observation. This one problem may account for all three of the preceding general criticisms.

In closing, it is noted that a review of the rather extensive body of literature on educational accountability reveals little empirical research which has been completed. Combs has provided yet another paper which discusses educational accountability without the inclusion of any empirical evidence. The booklet does not appear to contribute anything new to the topic of educational accountability as evidenced by references cited. Indeed, many of the ideas presented in the booklet are simply restatements of positions he has stated elsewhere (for example, Combs, 1965).

Many claims and counterclaims about educational accountability have been presented. Enough has been said about educational accountability reflecting a variety of philosophical or theoretical positions. The time has come to develop research proposals designed to provide clear empirical evidence to support or refute these claims. It is hoped that this article may serve as a turning point, moving from rational argument toward inquiry firmly rooted in an empirical tradition.

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