

# Methods Can Make a Difference

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**O**VER the past years there have been much discussion and disagreement about the comparative significance of methods used in the teaching-learning process. Arguments about methods, pro and con, vary greatly. At one end of the continuum is the belief that if teachers have adequate subject matter preparation or have developed ways of behaving which make possible a positive relationship with students, they will develop, on their own, appropriate methods of teaching. The other extreme is represented by the belief that content and other factors involved in effective teaching and learning can be acquired if the teacher has developed mastery in the skills of teaching. In between these extremes are many, varying points of view.

It is not my intention here to make a case for either of these contentions about methods. Rather I will attempt to establish that methods are important as one aspect of effective teaching-learning, with recognition that other factors are involved which are, at least, equal in significance.

In exploring the significance of methods I have made a limited study of several professional periodicals; examined innovations, to determine the extent to which they involve methods; analyzed, cursorily, several instruments and techniques used in assessing teacher effectiveness for items focused on

methods; reviewed a sampling of researches on methods; and gathered information from teachers which reflects their need and problems as they work with young people in the classroom. I will discuss each of these sources of data in turn.

## **The Literature and Methods**

In studying the table of contents of a sampling of professional journals I found considerable variation in the percent of articles focused on methods. There were fewer such articles in periodicals of a general nature, and less in secondary journals than in elementary. The journals with the most articles on methods, 25 to 50 percent, were those representing specific subjects or skills, such as mathematics education, reading, and the like. Journals which were general in nature, such as *Today's Education* and *Educational Leadership*, contain, on the average, in each volume from 10 to 20 percent of the material on methods. On examining the contents of two commercial periodicals which have by far the greatest number of subscribers, I found that it was not uncommon for an issue to have 50 percent or more of the articles and other materials focused on methods.

I feel sure that many of the editors and editorial boards of professional periodicals

keep abreast of the time and provide the kind of help that teachers and other professional workers need and want. Such being the case, they are providing help in methods because teachers need and want it. And if they need and want help in methods, methods must be important and must make a difference.

## Methodological Innovations

An analysis of current innovations indicates very clearly to me that almost all are either organizational or methodological. For example, innovations such as nongradedness, team teaching, differentiated staffing, learning centers, modular scheduling, and the middle school involve basically a change in organization or a different arrangement, although some changes in methods may be indicated.

New developments that focus upon changes in methods are many, and they continue to grow in number. For example, diagnostic teaching, teaching for inquiry and discovery, individually prescribed instruction, teaching problem solving, independent study, programmed learning, teaching for specific behavioral objectives, and a host of others are basically new ideas and changes in methodology.

When so much emphasis is being placed upon the discovery of new, more effective methods of teaching, it is evident that methods are important and do make a difference. If this is not tenable, one would have to assume that professional educators are unaware of the real needs of teachers for improved education.

## Evaluating of Teacher Effectiveness

I am assuming here that educators who have developed instruments and techniques for evaluating the effectiveness of teachers have studied the literature and research to determine at least to some extent the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor objectives of effective teaching. Starting with this assumption I analyzed a sampling of instruments to determine the degree to which they included methodological items.

Bryan developed a student opinion

questionnaire which he used in a study.<sup>1</sup> This instrument listed 10 characteristics of good teaching, of which four and possibly five could be categorized as methodological. Dalton<sup>2</sup> used this same questionnaire in another study which will be reported later in this article. Some years ago I worked with a group of 22 elementary principals to develop techniques, including an instrument, to be used cooperatively in the evaluation of teaching. The principals working with their teachers identified 205 items for this instrument, approximately one-third of which were focused upon methods.

Here again, it seems to me that the inclusion of methodology objectives in techniques and procedures for evaluating teacher effectiveness is an indication that methods are important and do make a difference.

## Research on Methods

There is very little research that indicates the degree of growth of students toward objectives which results from the use of one specific method of teaching. Wherever these researches are reported there are usually other researches which give an opposite or different result. Henriksen<sup>3</sup> reviewed a decade of researches in reading methods and concluded that, while methods are important, no one approach is distinctly better in all situations and respects than others. The review of research by Ahrens in handwriting and spelling and by Crews in composition indicates that methods do make a difference but that no one method is successful for all teachers.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Roy C. Bryan. *Twelve Teachers and Their Effects on Students*. Faculty Contributions, Series 4, No. 4. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, School of Graduate Studies, 1959. pp. 8, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth L. Dalton. *What Makes Effective Teachers for Young Adolescents*. Nashville, Tennessee: Department of Education, George Peabody College, 1962. p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> In: Maurice R. Ahrens, editor. *Communication Skills, Approaches to Teaching Reading*. Part II. Gainesville: Florida Educational Research and Development Council, 1971. p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Maurice R. Ahrens, editor. *Communication, Handwriting—Spelling—Composition*. Part III. Gainesville: Florida Educational Research and Development Council, 1971. p. 98.

In a research study by Bridges and others,<sup>5</sup> students were asked to select from 24 characteristics of teachers those which exemplified the best and the worst college teachers. Of the eight characteristics of best teachers chosen by students, four and possibly five involved methods; and of the 10 items chosen for the worst teachers, five included elements of methods.

Dalton,<sup>6</sup> in a study of what makes effective teachers for young adolescents, used a questionnaire developed by Bryan.<sup>7</sup> Five of the 10 items on this instrument involve methods. Among her conclusions from the responses of junior high school students were the following: (a) knowing how to teach is one of the major requisites for effective teaching at the junior high school level, (b) beginning teachers with strong background in methodology stimulate more favorable reactions among pupils than do teachers with weak backgrounds in how to teach, and (c) courses in methodology make more difference than courses in liberal arts as far as pupil reaction to teachers is concerned.

<sup>5</sup> Charles M. Bridges and others. "Characteristics of Best and Worst College Teachers." *Science Education* 55: 545-53; Oct./Dec. 1971.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth L. Dalton, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Roy C. Bryan, *op. cit.*

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## Teacher Needs

I have found in talking with teachers about their needs and problems that they invariably express a strong desire for help in methods. Several years ago, I asked teachers in two classes to list their greatest needs in teaching. I tabulated these and asked each one to select the three for which they felt the greatest need for help. Some 72 percent of the highest rated items were in the area of methodology.

In my last public school experience, we had a weekly workshop. The groups in this workshop were formed from the requests of teachers. Of the 33 groups that met regularly, 23 were focused on methods. Although these results are indications that methods are important and do make a difference, it may also be true that teachers put too much emphasis upon methods to the exclusion of other important aspects of teaching and learning.

From the information provided here, it is rather trite to pose the question, "Do methods make a difference?" If they do not, we in education have been wasting time, energy, and money in the continuous search for new, more effective methods. What is needed most is to put methods in context. We have a tendency to stress methods to the exclusion of other factors which make for good teaching and learning. For example, as previously mentioned, the current innovations are focused mainly on organizational arrangements and methodology, with little or no consideration to changes in the curriculum.

In other words, we are making changes in organization and developing new methods of teaching curricula which are outmoded and "out of step" with the developments in modern society. Furthermore, it is evident that no one method can be used successfully by all teachers. This leads me to the conclusion that in our preservice and in-service programs we need to familiarize teachers with a variety of methods so that they can choose those which they can implement best and with which they can obtain the best results with their students.

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