

Teachers' Attitudes Affect Their Work with Minorities

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THIS paper will explore in depth why teachers may have negative feelings toward students who are different from themselves and what perhaps can be done to improve their perceptions of the students. The writers will examine the questions:

1. Why do middle-class teachers have negative attitudes about the culturally different and/or minority child?
2. What effect does teacher attitude have on the achievement of the culturally different child?
3. What can be done to improve teacher attitudes toward the culturally different child?
4. What specific teaching skills are peculiar in the situation of teaching the culturally different?

Attitudes of Middle-Class Teachers

Assuming that middle-class teachers have the required skills to teach basic subjects, attitude then becomes the most crucial factor in teaching (Marburger, 1962). Their task is to teach children about the world in which they live, to help them relate to it posi-

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tively and successfully, and to help them have a realistic self image as learners (Purkey, 1970). This, however, will be impossible if the teachers have negative attitudes concerning the students. One cause of negativism may be middle-class teachers with their middle-class values, who were trained in middle-class colleges and universities. In addition, schools may adhere to goals that are incongruent with the cultural pattern of the families and students they serve (Marburger, 1962; Mill, 1960; Arnez, 1966; Cheyney, 1966).

This incongruence in goals and anticipated behavior causes great problems. Since

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everyone is a composite of all of his or her experiences, values, attitudes, attainments, aspirations, and failures; and since the middle-class teachers' culture is significantly different from the culture of minorities, this often causes the teacher to perceive minority children and their community negatively, and to develop curriculum in the light of their own background. Middle-class teachers frequently bring to their classrooms preconceived conceptions of minority students that unfortunately presuppose certain limits on the intelligence and abilities of minority children (Marburger, 1962).

Attitudes on Achievement

It is well documented that teacher attitudes have a major impact on the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective achievement of children (Clark, 1965; Rosenthal, 1968). Children are keenly perceptive. When teachers have negative feelings about their students' mental abilities and do not respect them, the teachers unwittingly condemn their students to poor achievement. If students perceive in their teachers genuine respect, support, and confidence in their ability to learn, teachers will have much success in their ability to relate to and to teach their students.

Clark (1969) was "determined to demonstrate that if children in a deprived community, in a low-income school, just had a program to motivate teachers to teach, something would happen for the children." During a three year segment of that program, one group of students made a median gain of 4.3 years in reading and arithmetic between the first and last testing sessions. One student who was retarded 1.4 years at the beginning of the project measured above grade level three years later. Apparently, motivated teachers, according to this project, do influence their students' achievement.

A program in the Banneker Schools in St. Louis, Missouri, was initiated to deal with a similar problem—general retardation. Within two years of the initiation of the program, the minority children were above grade level in significant school subjects.

The variables that seem to make the difference in these programs are more efficient teaching and more motivated teaching. These studies do indicate that culturally different children will advance academically if accepted and respected. Clark (1969) states, "One thing seems to be clear. They will not learn if they are approached as if they cannot.



Project Head Start

This seems to be true for all human beings."

Some teachers of poverty area children described them as loud, rebellious, show-off, stubborn, sulky, and touchy. Teachers of middle-class children described poverty area children as affectionate, changeable, and defensive. Successful teachers used the words affectionate, friendly, and talkative. Unsuccessful teachers invoked the words despondent, indifferent, inhibited, nervous, slipshod, sulky, and unstable. North and Buchanan informally asked the principals and supervisors who made the ratings of teacher success about their criteria for such ratings. The most common criterion mentioned was whether a teacher seemed to like poverty area children.

A recent study of teachers in a metropolitan school system revealed that attitudes about students became less favorable as the composition of the student body became more non-white. The least favorable attitudes about students were exhibited by teachers in the inner-city schools (Wiles, 1971).

Gottlieb's (1964) study notes the difference in attitudes of 89 black and white

elementary school teachers toward black and white pupils from low income families in a midwestern urban community. There seems to be evidence to support the proposition that race plays some part in how teachers react to their students. Each teacher was given a list containing 33 adjectives and was asked to check those adjectives which came closest to describing the outstanding characteristics of the children with whom he or she was working.

The white teachers tended to avoid these adjectives which reflected stability and the types of qualities one would desire of children in the formal classroom setting. The black teachers selected items which seemed to be universal attributes of children (for example, energetic, fun loving, and happy). It would appear that the black teachers were less critical and less pessimistic in their evaluations of the students than the white teachers.

Because the teacher is the most important variable in the child's learning environment, classroom teachers must develop more positive attitudes toward ethnic minorities and their cultures and must develop higher academic expectations of their young people. It is evident that teacher attitudes and expectations have a profound impact on students' perceptions, academic behavior, self concepts, and beliefs.

Improving Teacher Attitudes

There are many methods and approaches which may be incorporated into the teacher education programs and on-going teaching styles of teachers to improve their attitudes and instruction with culturally different children. Significant to this improvement are the following suggestions: Teacher education programs should include preservice training. The preservice training of prospective teachers is the first opportunity to improve attitudes of teachers of minority students. If the key to modification of behavior is involvement, then students preparing for a career in education should be exposed early in their preparation to the realities of life so that they may become adjusted and more aware of the minority child's situation. The preservice

program of teacher education should seek to develop in each prospective teacher a sense of genuine respect and empathy for children in the classroom and outside. The future teacher should become fully sensitive to the relationship between experience and character. It is important to realize that every child, whether minority or majority, comes to school with considerable potential and should not have to experience negative attitudes of teachers while commencing to learn. This preservice education hopefully will alert the prospective teacher to the fact that under proper conditions children are capable of learning.

Attitudes may begin to improve when the prospective teacher realizes that children sense quickly if a person likes or dislikes them. If children feel that they are being perceived negatively by their classroom teachers, the children in these classrooms will without a doubt be wasters of both energy and potential. Children's perceptions will determine whether or not teachers will be successful in accomplishing their objectives.

To help improve attitudes, teacher education institutions should include, in their programs, observation and a minimum of one year's student teaching experience under the supervision of a trained person in a minority school. Work in community agencies could prove to be very enlightening in the modification of teachers' attitudes as well as helping in subsequent professional endeavors. What better way to improve one's attitudes concerning a group than to work with them and learn that they too are significant individuals.

Learning the history of minority groups with emphasis on slavery, the civil rights movement, Black student movements in universities, and dialectology would provide insight for teachers and perhaps help to modify attitudes.

In addition, the acquisition of knowledge about the psychology and impact of prejudice and means for combating it combined with lectures and selected readings in the fields of sociology, psychology, cultural anthropology, and other relevant fields should be pertinent in effecting desired changes in the attitudes

of prospective and present teachers (Educational Policies Commission, 1965).

The education of teachers can never be regarded as finished. Successful teachers go on learning indefinitely, and their teaching is endlessly enriched by the experience which comes to them while teaching. Yet problems arise for which the interested teacher needs information, and he or she is not always able to find the time to track down sources to ameliorate the given situation. In this area, research can be most helpful since research continues in education. Teachers, especially those of the middle-class who are working with minority children, should have a stimulating program to bring about a change in negative attitudes and notions that they may have developed over the years. There is a real need to bring relevant information to the established teacher in the form of in-service education.

If the teachers have not previously studied the sociological and psychological aspects of minority children, the in-service program may provide them this opportunity. The environment—home, peers, language, community, and family structure—should be explored as a matter of course.

Past history dictates that it takes several generations to see improvement in the conditions of people through education. Hopefully teachers will learn faster. Conversely, it may be years before a teacher realizes that the results of a positive attitude toward a certain child will provide warmth and fulfillment in that child's life. It is the responsibility and obligation of teachers not only to improve their teaching skills, but their attitudes as well. However, the writers do realize that the changing of attitudes is one of the most difficult tasks.

Improving Teaching Skills

Teachers should fully realize that the transition from home to school may be a difficult one for the minority child. His or her values, preparation, and experiences are somewhat different from those taught in school. If the child is fortunate enough to have a principal and teachers who are under-

standing and knowledgeable, the school can fill the void in his or her background through cognitive and humanistic programs in preparation for the larger community.

All teachers should be well educated, have a working knowledge of the latest educational techniques, be creative, and have a deep love for and a dedication to their vocation. Teachers of minority children should have the following attributes three-fold as lamented by Waddles (1968),

... great flexibility, uncommon physical strength, and a genuine belief that there is good in every human being, plus the ability to accept progress . . . to communicate with alienated youth and parents, to handle emergencies, and to laugh at one's self (p. 38).

A pupil's learning is, in large measure, a function of the kind of teaching to which he or she is exposed. The child's learning ability reflects not only aptitudes and attitudes but also the ability of the teacher. Every child should be given the opportunity to receive an education in accordance with his or her needs and abilities regardless of national, ethnic, or socioeconomic background. When substantial inequalities in educational achievement are acknowledged between groups, then important questions should be asked (Jensen, 1971). For example, do I have knowledge of my students' environment? Do I accept their values? Am I trying to make them behave according to *my* guidelines? Should I accept them as real people with real feelings?

An acquaintance with the history, traditions, and social structure of the families should become part of the teacher's repertoire. An acceptance and knowledge of the child's language are necessary before he or she can be considered an effective teacher.

A skillful teacher perfects his or her ability to meet the minority child on equal terms—person to person, individual to individual. Without question the teacher is warm and outgoing, flexible in his or her conduct with pupils, respectful, and supportive so that the pupils know that he or she believes in their innate abilities. The teacher acknowledges the danger of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" and, therefore, expects more from

the pupil than the pupil may think he or she can achieve; but, the teacher, nevertheless, keeps these expectations within limits to prevent pupil frustration. The teacher is complimentary but honest (Goldberg, 1963).

Teachers must fully understand the fundamental concepts and techniques of education if they are to be effective and creative. When working with the culturally different child, teachers should approach their jobs with dedication and applied educational logic such as initiating tasks with the child that are congruent with his or her level at that point in time; taking the student from the simple to the complex in learning situations; finding the approach with which a specific child learns best; making the necessary effort to ensure that the child understands a concept before proceeding to the next. Were this accomplished, the schools would not have such a large number of students leaving school two and three years behind in grade level. A child's learning foundations must be solidly laid in the primary grades and each layer of knowledge

skillfully applied and organized to facilitate effective, sequential learning (Ausubel, 1963).

Gottlieb (1967) states that the teacher's support is in three areas. The first category would be in the form of instrumental aid, that is, showing the pupils that they are able to do the required work and are progressing toward their short and long range goals. Support must also be shown cognitively by providing the pupils with the study skills, information, and direction according to their individual needs. Affective support would be demonstrated by the teachers showing the pupils that they are sincerely interested in and care about them.

It is necessary to involve the parents in the child's education. Not only do the parents fulfill an inherent need of being involved, but they become aware of what is happening to their child and how they may be able to help. Also, the parents then no longer feel that the school is an institution in which they are not welcomed (Rivlin, 1964).

The significant variables that make the difference in minority children's achieve-

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ments are the teachers; their attitudes, the quality of teaching, their understanding of the children's environment, their ability to convey to the students that they want to teach them, their ability to be supportive and respectful, and their continued assurance to the children that they are capable of learning math, science, history, English, chemistry, and other subjects. Similarly, teachers must not only help to prepare the students but must let them know that they may become engineers, physicists, attorneys, surgeons, chemists, or members of any profession which they may choose.

The teacher-training institutions and school boards have a responsibility to prepare and to recruit concerned and dedicated teachers. The teachers should be provided with

support and in-service programs to ensure a continuous meaningful education for the culturally different.

Teachers must have knowledge and understanding of the characteristics of culturally different children. The concerned teacher will make an effort to understand that the culture of the pupils is different from, not inferior to other cultures. Being aware of the background of students will help teachers know how to motivate the students and will provide insight and guidelines for their preparation of teaching strategies and materials designed for classroom use. *High expectation* through adequately planned assignments and *respect* are the key elements for success in classrooms of the culturally different.

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