

Teacher Competence in the Urban Schools

Claude Mayberry

How can we define competence in teaching the disadvantaged pupil? Several criteria are suggested.

In addition to asking why pupils fail to learn, we should ask why we have not succeeded in teaching them.¹

Twelve thousand students from across the country were asked to write a response to the item, "The Teacher Who Has Helped You the Most."² Ages of the students ranged from nine to fourteen. A frequency distribution of the characteristics most mentioned ranked in the following order:

1. Cooperative, democratic attitudes
2. Kindliness and consideration for the individual (social sensitivity)
3. Patience
4. Wide interests
5. Personal appearance and pleasing manner
6. Fairness and impartiality
7. Sense of humor
8. Good disposition and consistent behavior
9. Interest in pupils' problems
10. Flexibility
11. Use of recognition and praise

12. Unusual proficiency in teaching a particular subject.

Today there is a lot of discussion about incompetence in teaching amid the growing concern for accountability of educators in general. However, it makes little sense to call any teacher incompetent unless we first have some definition of what constitutes a competent teacher. The usual definition of teacher competence is in terms of student achievement. Moreover, there seems to be a natural reluctance on the part of most educators to venture any further toward specifying other criteria for teacher competence, in view of the vast human variation in teachers.

To define competence in teaching the disadvantaged child solely in terms of that child's academic achievement is inadequate for several reasons. First, how do we measure accurately the cognitive achievement of any student, especially

¹ Irving Adler. "Criteria of Success in the Seventies." *The Mathematics Teacher* 65:40; January 1972.

² Irene Steele Tudeo. "Do Teachers' Attitudes Affect Learning?" *NASSP Bulletin* 61(400):10; February 1977.

a disadvantaged one? Right now, for example, major testing firms are being challenged and confronted by black educators across the country with regard to the cultural biases that exist in their nationwide intelligence and achievement tests.³

Second, we are just at the threshold of developing instruments that will measure with any reliability the affective factors that influence student achievement, such as self-image, interests, and motivation. However, affective considerations probably play a more significant role in the teaching of disadvantaged children than do purely cognitive ones. Until we can develop a systematic method for taking into account the numerous factors external to the classroom environment that reduce the capacity of the disadvantaged child to perform at an expected level, it is clearly unfair to correlate teacher competence with student achievement.

The third reason to believe the student-achievement definition of teacher competence to be inadequate is that it provides only an indirect criterion for evaluating a teacher's effectiveness. Although this criterion of student achievement is probably the ultimate measure of teacher success despite the difficulties noted earlier, nevertheless it would be helpful to have some direct criteria for judging the competence of a teacher.

One direct means that has been used is student evaluation of instructors. However, many educators have grave doubts about both the validity and the reliability of these student ratings of teachers. The results of studies conducted at the college level have often proved inconclusive, although there is some recent evidence⁴ that college student rating of instructors may indeed be valid, at least under certain circumstances. But an instrument such as student ratings, still of doubtful validity at the college level, is of very dubious value at the secondary level, and cannot even be seriously considered at the elementary level as a means for measuring teaching competence.

Therefore, I would like to propose a tentative list of criteria that, on the whole, characterize competent teachers of the disadvantaged. No claim is made that a teacher must satisfy each and every one of these criteria in order to be competent, nor that satisfaction of these criteria

guarantees teacher competence. Rather, as research evidence continues to accumulate, there will tend to be a significant positive correlation between satisfaction of these criteria and success at the ultimate goal of education—maximizing student achievement.

1. *Academic Preparation.* The sociology of each educational community is unique. A disad-

"The usual definition of teacher competence is in terms of student achievement. Moreover, there seems to be a natural reluctance on the part of most educators to venture any further toward specifying other criteria for teacher competence, in view of the vast human variation in teachers."

vantaged community may be disadvantaged socially, economically, or both. Similarly, each child in a community is disadvantaged in a unique way. The typical introductory sociology and psychology courses do not adequately prepare a teacher to deal effectively with the kinds of problems that arise in teaching the disadvantaged. Special training or experience in the sociology and psychology of the disadvantaged is one characteristic of a competent teacher of the disadvantaged.

Another area of importance that has been largely overlooked by the institutions that train teachers is that of political influence on education. It behooves any teacher to understand the profound effects that political realities—involving everyone from school administrators on up to state legislators—exert upon the disadvantaged educational community. Keen appreciation of the possibilities and limitations inherent in the politics of education is another characteristic of a competent teacher.

Teacher-training institutions should be less concerned about the number of credit hours of mathematics an elementary school teacher should

³Black National Conference on Testing in Education and Employment; Hampton, Virginia: Hampton Institute, April 1973.

⁴Peter K. Gessner. "Evaluation of Instruction." *Science* 180:566-70; 1973.

have and more concerned about the content of the courses offered. The content of mathematics courses for teachers of the disadvantaged should be no different from those for any mathematics teacher. I will not presume to try to describe in this article the specific subject matter of such courses, particularly in view of the fact that the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) has published guidelines for this very

"The more professional interaction that takes place among teachers, the greater potential there is for the continuing growth of each individual. And continuous professional growth is probably the most important characteristic of a competent teacher."

purpose.⁵ However, in addition to mathematics courses, every prospective teacher should take one or more methods courses that emphasize special training in the methodology for the disadvantaged. A solid background in the appropriate mathematics content, plus some familiarity with effective pedagogical techniques for the disadvantaged is a third characteristic of the competent teacher.

Crisuolo⁶ offers a much broader perspective through five questions that he suggests all school administrators and boards pose to new applicants. I would suggest that they be considered for tenure evaluation as well (Questions four and five were modified for this article.):

a. What professional journals or other related materials have you voluntarily read in the last year?

b. Can you describe briefly the greatest teacher you ever had? (The candidate ought to describe a teacher who is knowledgeable, fair, enthusiastic, and who enjoys his/her subject, his/her teaching and students.)

c. What kinds of classroom atmosphere does an excellent teacher create?

d. What are the characteristics of a good lesson?

e. If you were given a check for x dollars,

what materials would you buy? (Anyone who wants to teach in your system should certainly be able to name specific material. But the candidate should stress that the process, not the material, is the main tool for effective teaching.)

2. *Preservice Internship.* Few prospective teachers have the opportunity for much structured classroom experience prior to student teaching. Development of preservice internship programs, beginning as early as the sophomore year in college, would raise the general level of teaching competence, particularly in inner-city schools, for a variety of reasons.

First, early classroom experience would serve as an automatic screening device to enable students ill-suited for teaching to recognize the inappropriateness of their career choice in time to switch to other majors. Second, early classroom experience would help to maximize the benefit that prospective teachers derive from both content and methods courses by effectively counterbalancing these cognitive courses to effect a state of relevance.⁷

Third, it has been shown that preservice training programs can significantly raise the level of admiration and respect for disadvantaged children felt by prospective teachers primarily interested in working with disadvantaged youth.⁸

In a recent study done on the attitudes of white prospective teachers toward the inner-city schools, Washington⁹ indicated that it should be imperative that attitude assessment must become a requirement for all teachers in the inner-city schools. The study concluded further that all teacher training programs should incorporate "techniques that viscerally encourage teachers to

⁵ "Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of Mathematics." Reston, Virginia: National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 1973.

⁶ Nicholas P. Crisuolo. "How To Size Up a Prospective Reading Teacher." *The American School Board Journal*, July 1977. p. 27.

⁷ Claude Mayberry, Jr. "Mathematics Inner-City: Relevance." *Education for the Disadvantaged Child* 1:28-31; Summer 1973.

⁸ Gilbert E. Mazer. "Attitude and Personality Change in Student Teachers of Disadvantaged Youth." *Journal of Education Research* 63:116-20; November 1969.

⁹ Kenneth R. Washington. "An Analysis of the Attitudes of White Prospective Teachers Towards Inner-City Schools." *Howard University Press* 46:38; 1977.

focus on the culture strengths of the inner-city schools."

Since it is well-known that teacher expectations can significantly affect student achievement, it follows that carefully planned and well-supervised internship experience early in the student's undergraduate program would ultimately raise the level of teacher competence, in addition to providing important fringe benefits both to the prospective teacher and the school system.¹⁰

3. *Personality.* Compared to the amount of research done on the relationship between student personality and student achievement, there has been relatively little research on the relationship between teacher personality and student achievement. Moreover, results have been mixed, to say the least, with regard to the effect of particular teacher-personality traits upon student achievement. There is, however, much more convincing evidence that teacher attitude has a significant effect on student achievement. Gansneder,¹¹ for example, has shown that teacher attitude is especially important in working with disadvantaged children.

I believe much more research is needed to determine what effect, if any, various personality traits have upon a teacher's effectiveness with disadvantaged children. Also, further research to determine whether or not compatibility of teacher and student personality traits is important for maximizing student achievement would be helpful, subject to the practical limitations encountered in trying to match students and teachers. Finally, additional research might reveal the extent to which personality traits influence a teacher's effectiveness in various teaching situations. As we learn more about these affective considerations, we will be better able to say what personal qualities characterize a competent teacher in any given set of circumstances.

4. *Continuous Professional Growth.* This last category of criteria for characterizing teacher competence is an extremely broad one. Professional growth can be defined in many ways, but let us address ourselves to the vast range of activities that reflect an internalized commitment to the teaching profession. This is the kind of commitment that intrinsically motivates one to accept

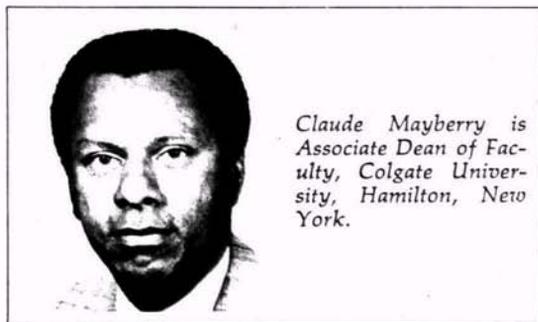
and carry out the responsibilities inherent in the role of professional educator.

One activity that helps to nurture professional growth is that of researching the literature related to one's field of specialization. A teacher of the disadvantaged is a specialist not only in one or more discipline areas, but also in education for the disadvantaged. There are volumes of information related to each of these specialities, and it would be, of course, impossible for a teacher to have knowledge of them all. Nevertheless, a competent teacher will assume responsibility for researching as much as possible the current literature related to education of the disadvantaged and incorporating new ideas in the classroom whenever appropriate.

Professional workshops and conferences, graduate courses, and informal seminars are other means for maintaining professional growth by enabling educators in different communities to learn from one another. Teachers can also learn from each other right within their own school by observing, and being observed by, colleagues in the classroom. The more professional interaction that takes place among teachers, the greater potential there is for the continuing growth of each individual. And continuous professional growth is probably the most important characteristic of a competent teacher. [E]

¹⁰ Early internship programs might be conducted on a cooperative work-study basis, thereby benefiting the prospective teacher financially, enabling the school to use student aides whenever feasible to allow teachers greater freedom to pursue professional activities.

¹¹ Bruce M. Gansneder. "Relationships Among Teachers' Attitudes, Students' Attitudes, and Students' Achievement." *Dissertation Abstracts International* 31: 1971; The Ohio State University.



Claude Mayberry is Associate Dean of Faculty, Colgate University, Hamilton, New York.

Copyright © 1978 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.