

What We Know About Teachers' Problems

For the past 15 years my colleagues and I have been studying the problems of teachers. Psychology defines a problem as goal-response interference. Life is filled with problems of all kinds because we have goals of all kinds that are interfered with.

Teacher educators and researchers have a responsibility to help teachers resolve their problems and reach their goals.

We began our research by asking teachers themselves to identify their problems. This was a radical departure from earlier studies that had asked building principals, supervisors, and college professors to name teacher problems. We assumed that a problem exists *only* in the eyes of the beholder. In other words, if you don't think you have a problem, indeed you don't!

In each study a large sample of teachers provided us with anecdotal information. Teachers were usually asked to describe one event each day for a week or more. One teacher reported:

Once each week all the teachers at each grade level hold a meeting. During the meeting they decide what they will teach, what special activities will be held for the kids, and so forth. Once again, it was them against me—a new teacher. Nobody seems to want to hear what I have to say.

Once the events were collected, they were read with an eye for determining which of the teachers' goals

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were being interfered with. The goal inferred from the above anecdote might be that the new teacher wanted to be accepted as an equal among peers. Since she wasn't, we can say that her goal had met with interference; thus, the teacher had a problem.

After eliminating duplicates, the remaining goal statements submitted by teachers were used to make up an instrument called a teacher problem checklist. Once the instrument was completed, it was administered to a similar sample of teachers.¹

The instrument was constructed in such a way that teachers were able to react to each problem statement in terms of whether the problem was frequent and/or bothersome. As a result, we found some of each and some of both. For example, inner-city elementary teachers reported that classroom interruptions were frequent but they weren't especially bothersome. The same sample of teachers reported that cheating, lying, or stealing were bothersome but not frequent. On the other hand, inner-city teachers reported that lack of appropriate reading materials in the homes of students was both frequent and bothersome.

Across the studies, the problems teachers report are relatively stable. Elementary and secondary first-year teachers, inner-city teachers, and teachers of the rural disadvantaged—all have problems that are much more alike than different. They differ only slightly in their perceptions of the frequency and severity of the prob-

lems. In one study (Kennedy and others, 1976) that compared the problems of secondary teachers with the location of their schools (inner-city, outer-city, suburban, and rural), all teachers, regardless of the location of their schools, reported the same problems to be equally bothersome. However, the same teachers differed according to their school location when they reported the frequency of the problems. Inner-city teachers were different from the rest; they reported that certain problems, such as discipline or control, occurred much more often. But all teachers reported the same problem and all said it was bothersome.

What have we learned from these studies? What do we know about teacher problems now? At least a dozen things, including:

1. Teachers have problems and they will admit to them;
2. Some problems are frequently occurring, some problems are bothersome, and some are both;
3. Teacher problems are relatively stable;
4. Teacher problems can be grouped;
5. Teacher problems are not entirely unlike the problems of most people;
6. Teacher problems seem related to teacher personality characteristics;
7. Teachers need help;
8. Teacher problems can be reproduced;

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9. Teachers can be taught skills in problem solving;

10. Some theory related to teacher problems is available for use;

11. Teacher problems are a reasonable focus for preservice and in-service education;

12. And finally, there are several ways we can reduce or eliminate teacher problems.

What Teachers Need

The problems teachers perceive and report can be grouped by subjecting the data from the studies to a statistical procedure. When this was done from study to study, the same problems fell into five broad areas of concern representing unfulfilled goals: (1) affiliation, (2) control, (3) parent relationships and home conditions, (4) student success, and (5) time.

Affiliation. Teachers need to establish and maintain good relationships with others in the school, both staff and pupils. Teachers want cooperation and support from other teachers and administrators; such support makes them feel professionally satisfied. Teachers want to have confidence in and respect for their colleagues. They also want to have good feelings about their pupils—they want to like them and to be liked and treated with respect in return.

Control. Teachers want pupils to behave appropriately—to be relatively quiet, orderly, and courteous. They also expect students to be honest and to show respect for others and for property. In general, teachers believe such control will result in more enjoyable and productive experiences for the pupils and for themselves. When pupils don't behave in appropriate ways, teachers are faced with decisions about control and some become frustrated. As a consequence, they may become hostile and claim that students have learning problems when, in fact, they may not; or they may have certain pupils removed from the class.

Parent relationships and home conditions. Teachers want to relate and work well with adults outside the school who are important in the lives of children. They are especially concerned about understanding the conditions that exist in students' homes and communities. Teachers would like to be able to support the values of parents and communities and to be supported in return. Sometimes dif-

ferences in values make it hard to create and maintain mutual support. Sometimes lack of mutual support and understanding results from poor or limited communication.

Although teachers know they have little influence over home and community values and conditions, they would prefer these factors to enhance students' intellectual, emotional, and social development.

Student success. Teachers want students to possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will help them attain academic and social success. Because teachers care, they nurture, tutor, counsel, motivate, and cajole pupils—anything so that they do well! They may even be guilty of marking pupils too high and consequently lowering academic standards. With the same goal in mind, some teachers may demand punctuality and attentiveness and become grumpy when pupils do not meet these expectations.

Time. Teachers want to be effective managers of their personal and professional lives, but time often interferes. Teachers have either too much time or too little. They would

like more time to plan, more time to work with students, more time to evaluate student progress, and more time for themselves. On the other hand, they want to spend less time coping with interruptions, attending unproductive faculty meetings, fulfilling extra duties unrelated to instruction, or dealing with changes in the regular school routine.

One study tried to determine whether there was a relation between the perceived problems of teachers and their personalities (Myers and others, 1979b). Secondary teachers who were asked to identify their problems also took a personality inventory. The teachers' five broad areas of concern were then compared to their personality profiles. Teachers who were highly bothered by classroom control and time management problems tended also to be anxious about performance and reluctant to face problems. They were absent-minded and sensitive to criticism; they liked a set routine, they wanted sympathy, and they were easily influenced. On the other hand, teachers in a second group who were highly bothered about affiliation tended also to



be self-critical, angry, dependent, shy, not considerate, and not virtuous.

The same study also tried to determine whether teachers reporting certain kinds of problems, for example affiliation, were more satisfied or dissatisfied than teachers reporting other kinds of problems. As a group, teachers who reported affiliation problems were the most dissatisfied with teaching.

Relatively speaking, teachers need help and they hurt. They are not as satisfied as they want to be with the role of teaching. Unless they are able to reduce or eliminate their problems or attain their goals, they will feel considerable stress and burnout.

How We're Helping Teachers

One way to help preservice and inservice teachers is to have them simulate their problems in a safe, threat-free environment. The two most not-

ticular problem-solving process that can be taught to teachers to expedite and make solving classroom problems more effective, both in simulations and in real classrooms. We have used several versions of the process,³ which contains steps to identify a problem and its owner, clarify the importance of the goal being sought, and analyze the problem situation. More specifically, it identifies obstacles to achieving the goal and projects how they can be removed or overcome. It rates the proposed solutions to the problem, implements the preferred solution, and, finally, determines the extent to which the solution has achieved the goal.

We do not know whether teachers trained to use a problem-solving paradigm would perform better than teachers left to their own devices. This is a researchable but, as yet, unresearched question.

only those who have found ways to satisfy general human needs. The assumption is that those persons might be equally adept at solving role-related problems. Through such screening, it might be possible to eliminate persons from teaching who are "problemated" generally.

Second, entrance into teaching could be limited to graduates who can demonstrate ability to solve teacher-related problems. Candidates could be placed in simulations and their behavior observed. It should be particularly useful to know in advance how teachers might react to frequent and bothersome classroom problems and especially the extent to which they are debilitated by them.

Another approach is to provide on-the-job counseling for teachers so they can become more effective personal and professional problem solvers. Quite possibly a counselor can have greater impact on students by working with troubled teachers than by working with a few, isolated young people.

Our 15 years of studying teacher problems have borne considerable fruit. Most of it, however, still hangs on the tree. Few preservice teacher preparation programs address the problems of practice, and inservice programs do little more than respond to state or federal mandates for program changes or desegregation. It is no wonder teachers report greater stress and burnout than ever before. Their problems are not being attended to and their responsibilities are being expanded. They can and should be helped. ■

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able simulations are the *Teaching Problems Laboratory* (Cruikshank Broadbent, and Bubb, 1967) and the *Inner-City Simulation Laboratory* (Cruikshank, 1969),² both reproduce the most frequent and bothersome problems reported by teachers.

Participants assume the role of a teacher in a hypothetical school and, after orientation to their role and their students, are presented with a variety of problems. Participants are then asked to form small-group problem-solving teams. Each participant offers an alternative solution to a particular problem while other members project consequences the solution might have for a child, the class, parents, other teachers, or the administrator. In one study, preservice teachers who used simulation in lieu of part of their student teaching were judged by supervising teachers to have fewer problems than the control group that had student teaching only (Cruikshank and Broadbent, 1968).

We have been working on a par-

Classroom problems are a reasonable and responsible focus for preservice and inservice education. Preservice teachers should be readied for the realities of classroom life; they should be able to experience its difficult moments safely; and they should be provided with information that will help them gain their goals. Similarly, inservice programs should attend to teachers' workaday concerns. Practicing teachers can identify their problems and work independently or in groups to resolve them. Unfortunately, preservice and inservice education seldom focuses directly on the problems teachers encounter. Rather, teachers are told that if they are good they won't have problems. That is rubbish! All teachers have problems.

There are other ways to reduce or eliminate teacher problems. Entrance into teaching could be limited to graduates who seem to enjoy a high degree of personal satisfaction and fulfillment. In other words, accept

¹ This was roughly the common procedure used across several studies that examined the problems of (1) first-year elementary and junior high teachers (Cruikshank and Broadbent, 1968), (2) inner-city elementary teachers (Cruikshank and Leonard, 1967), (3) elementary teachers serving the rural disadvantaged (Cruikshank and others, 1968), (4) teachers in American secondary schools (Cruikshank and others, 1974), (5) recent graduates of The Ohio State University (Myers and Cruikshank, 1974), (6) teachers in open-space elementary schools (Cruikshank and Myers, 1974), (7) teachers of reading (Myers and others, 1979a), and (8) secondary teachers and the relationship of those problems to teachers' personality characteristics (Myers and others, 1979b). For a complete description of the procedure used in

each study, see Cruickshank and Myers, 1976.

² The *Inner-City Simulation Laboratory* has been highly recommended by the National Education Association (1979).

³ The most recent version is contained in *Teaching is Tough* (Cruickshank and Associates, 1980). The book describes a problem-solving process related to the five areas of teacher concerns, based on a theory drawn from the behavioral sciences. It is a self-help book for teachers that can also be used by supervisors and principals.

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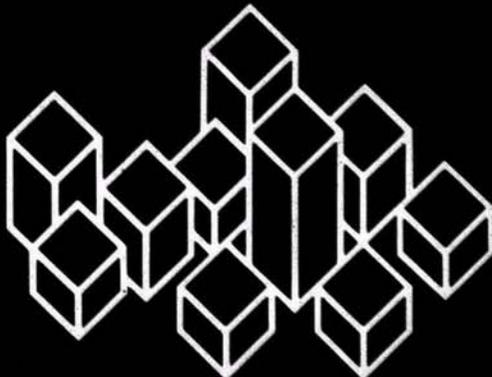
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