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The Influence of Teachers' Behavior on Elementary Children

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It is in the classroom that a child has to first accept the authority of a relative stranger. This stranger, the child's teacher, rarely realizes the profound impact that her attitude, demands, and actions make on that child.

One area in which the classroom teacher wields a frightening amount of influence is in the personality development of her students. It is imperative that the teacher be happy in the profession and that she like children if she is to have a positive effect on them. Too often a student discovers that she isn't suited to classroom teaching only after she begins practice teaching, and by then she feels it is too late to sacrifice credits and change to another career. This is not fair to children whose personality development depends so much on the approval they would receive from a satisfied teacher. Institutions of teacher preparation could remedy the situation of teachers in a career for which they are not suited by giving students even in their freshman year of college experiences with teaching and with children which would enable them to assess their own feelings.

In the course of a teacher's career she will come in contact with all sorts of children and with all sorts of personalities. Some will be appealing and easy to work with and others will not. Once the teacher understands why certain children behave as they do, why she, as a teacher, reacts to these children as she does, and what influence her reactions exert on the personality development of the children, she will probably become a much more effective teacher.

It takes a strong teacher to refrain from favoring children of one sex or the other, of a certain socio-economic level, of prestigious parents, or of a certain personality type. However, it is the teacher's responsibility to treat every child as though he is someone special, and then each child will respond accordingly.

Children usually resent a teacher who has favorites and often express this resentment by being sullen and uncooperative. Many times the "petted" child is resented as much as the teacher. A teacher should also refrain from favoring certain children because of the feeling of rejection that these children receive when they enter another grade or class and they are no longer the "teacher's pet".

There are often petty mannerisms, traits, and habits that a teacher finds annoying, and pupils who exhibit these forms of behavior tend to be rejected. Human behavior may be approached in two ways. It may be viewed in

its overt form and the form described as it appears, or it may be discussed in terms of the factors that produced it. The two approaches will probably lead to significant differences in the reactions of the teacher to the behavior and in the methods she uses in attempting to work with it. If the teacher will learn to understand that children have no control over the environment which produces many of the undesirable traits, and will remember her own experiences and petty characteristics as an elementary student, she will have more control over her feelings and actions. Often a teacher can become more tolerant by simply getting to know the child better and by becoming interested in him. A teacher can also extend the scope of her appreciation for different personalities through travel, broad reading, and meeting and mingling with people.

A teacher may unload her aggression on an entire group by constantly scolding and nagging or she might single out one child as the "scapegoat" for the group. It may be that the child who triggers scapegoat treatment would be a trial to any teacher, but the better balanced teacher would understand the child's disturbance and be patient with him, instead of feeling threatened as a weaker teacher would.

The quiet, withdrawn child in the classroom has another type of behavior that is often misunderstood. Though most teachers prize these meek, undemanding children,

mental hygienists consider their form of behavior most serious. When a teacher will distribute her attention evenly and give these withdrawn children the encouragement they need, she will be surprized how often their personalities blossom and come to life under her regard.

If the various aspects of personality development were watched closely by the teacher, it seems probable that the beginnings of behavior difficulties could be detected long before the difficulties emerge as serious behavior problems. The present tendency of waiting for a problem to develop before doing something--of giving the "problem child" the center of emphasis--is analogous to waiting for the child to fail a test before beginning to teach. A teacher who has been trained in child and personality development and who has information about the child's personality should be able to detect the beginnings of behavior problems and be able to redirect development long before the problem gets out of hand.

To study whether the personality growth of children can be controlled if a careful analysis of behavior is made by the teacher, sixty-six ninth grade students were divided into an experimental group and a control group.

The two groups were closely matched in scores on the Otis Group Intelligence Test, in age, and in achievement of the previous year as measured by grade points. Comparisons of the experimental and control groups were made in the following areas: school achievement (grade

points), selected attitudes (attitude tests--including items relative to the pupil's attitude toward his school, his teacher, his home, and himself), personality conflicts (tested by revisions of Lauria's method), and teachers' ratings of the general adjustment of the pupil. Comparisons were made at the beginning and at the completion of the study.

Teachers were given personality and environmental data (and suggestions as to their meaning and use) on the experimental students. The nature of each child's ambitions, his satisfaction with the home environment, his attitudes toward his companions, etc., were obtained from the attitude tests. Interviews with parents gave insight of home environment, parental attitudes, and the child's behavior at home.

Investigators summarized, explained, and interpreted facts for teachers. The investigators gave them suggestions on how to work with each child and made sure that the teachers understood the pupil's behavior. Each teacher then proceeded to apply her knowledge in planning the child's daily work in her classes. The investigators discussed the pupil's progress with the teacher from time to time and made suggestions for improvement of the program.

The experiment was begun in the fall and continued through the school year. The measurements were repeated just before the close of school in the spring.

At the close of the experiment the following differences were noted. The experimental group made significantly greater academic gains. (The teachers had not been aware that academic achievement would be used as a measure of comparison, so there is little chance that they had "given grades" to make the study more conclusive.) The experimental group reflected a more positive attitude toward school. They felt that planned work, not chance, brought achievement. They felt work brought its own reward and that education can be made worthwhile. They also felt less need for cheating.

The experimental group also had a better attitude toward their companions. They had fewer feelings of inferiority and in general seemed happier in school and at home than the control group did.

From fall to spring, analysis showed a decrease in mental conflicts in the experimental group and a slight increase in the control group.

Test results showed that the experimental group seemed to be heading in the direction of more impersonal, objective, and logical types of mental activities.

Teachers stated that after they had gained insight into children's personalities, their attitudes and treatment of the children changed. They said they had mistaken unhappiness for resentment or insolence. They had translated discouragement as mousiness. "Shyness, resentment, over-aggression, and indifference.....are signals not

for neglect or for the drawing of battle lines but for the need of mutual understanding and helpfulness.

The data obtained in this study are consistent in showing that when teachers learn to know their pupils as personalities in their respective environments teachers tend to become more effective guides for learning--the pupils achieve more in academic areas--and teachers also become more effective personality 'developers'."[1]

Another study seems to show a correlation between teachers' attitudes and students' personality development. Permissiveness or warmth, absence of authoritarianism, openness of belief systems, and liberalism of educational viewpoints on the part of the teachers were paralleled with growth in self-directedness, personal and social responsibility, spontaneity, critical problem solving, etc., in students.

In the classroom effective learning requires strong motivation. A teacher who knows the child's attitudes, conflicts, problems, and goals can plan a more effective program of work for him. She can motivate him better. But understanding children as individuals is not enough. The teacher must organize and guide the class in a manner that the class as a whole will feel is fair and efficient.

As long as the teacher's authority is recognized and discipline is no problem, many times it is wise for a teacher to let the children set the rules for classroom

behavior. The atmosphere should be prescriptive as well as restrictive. There should be as many "do's" as "don't's".

A teacher should reveal herself as an individual by getting to know students and their families as well as possible. By commenting on the children's absenses, she can let them know that they are important to her. A classroom teacher is in a good position to show children that adults are human too; that they also make mistakes; and that mistakes are not dishonorable.

In working with children, a teacher must remember that it is her work with and the accomplishment of individuals that is most important. She must make assignments meaningful and challenging to each student. Usually the attention of her students is a clue to the teaching and planning ability of the teacher and to the relevance of the subject matter.

Organization is very important in keeping control in the classroom. A teacher who is well prepared will feel secure and adequate. Since signs of insecurity invite trouble in elementary classes, a secure teacher will have one less trouble source to worry about.

A teacher needs to be careful about showing any disrespect for the administration or for any form of authority. Children learn more than academic subjects from their teacher, and any lack of respect on the part of the teacher will be imitated by her students in the

form of disrespect and rebellion.

The influence a teacher's behavior has on a child is even greater when the child is ecomonically disadvantaged.

In ghettos, students often fail because they have been expected to fail. They legitimate what they presume their teachers expect of them. Therefore, teachers of disadvantaged children must let them know that they have the highest expectations from each child. Teachers can say to them through their own behavior--non-verbal and verbal--that someone "out there" thinks they are important, that their concerns rate attention, and that everybody "out there" does not have to like them for them to be accepted.

Middle class teachers often get bogged down because they cannot transcend their own value systems to meet that of their students. Teachers working with disadvantaged children need help from specialists in understanding the children's value systems.

It is imperative that a teacher of the disadvantaged be approachable and be close to her students. The children should be able to sense whether she likes them and whether she believes that they can succeed. The teacher should be willing and ready to defend her students.

Discipline problems in the classroom stem most of the time from the children seeking the attention that they crave. A teacher should not take a student's outburst

personally, but if he says something for shock value, the teacher should care enough to be shocked, and she should let the child know that she is shocked and disappointed.

Teachers need not feel that they have to push subject matter (even though "education" for the disadvantaged is very important). These children need social help more. Teachers many times feel guilty when they take time out from the 3 R's to help children with their emotional and social needs. However, these children benefit much more from receiving the help that they need than they would from receiving purely academic instruction.

The importance of a teacher's preparing her students academically and socially for a better life is reflected in this quote: ". . . without successful achievement in the school, the Negro youngster is in early life denied access to economic productivity and a share in the American Dream."[2] A teacher can only prepare her students if she herself is well prepared and if she continues her preparation throughout her career.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Ralph H. Ojemann and Francis P. Wilkinson, "The Effect on Pupil Growth of an Increase in Teacher's Understanding of Pupil Behavior," The Child--A Book of Readings (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), p. 186.

[2]Estelle S. Fuchs, [illegible] in the Streets (New York: [illegible], 1965), p. 165.

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