

## TEACHER AND SITUATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS WHICH ENHANCE LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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It has long been recognized that teacher characteristics (genuineness, acceptance, and understanding) are important factors related to students' acquisition of information and personal development. Also of interest has been the identification of situational factors (emotional warmth, respect, success, and freedom) which facilitate optimal development in school settings. This paper reviews literature from the humanistic authors which focus on teacher and situational characteristics conducive to the transmittal of important academic material to the students while simultaneously enhancing their growth as individuals.

In recent years there has been a great deal of discussion concerning how the process of education should unfold in order to best facilitate the development of students. There are various opinions as to what constitutes the most appropriate and beneficial form schooling should take. Some writers, recommend the open school format (Kohl 1969; Neill, 1960). Others advocate schools in which one repeatedly experiences success rather than failure (Glasser, 1969; Purkey, 1978). Still others support strict behavioral programs (Bereiter and Engleman, 1966). Currently there is a concern as to which characteristics of teachers and learning situations best foster the development of the "entire person".

The aim of this paper is to briefly review the literature related to altering or modifying the educational process so that it succeeds in conveying important factual information to the learner while simultaneously enhancing one's growth as an individual. Two aspects of education which will be examined are the characteristics of the teacher and the characteristics of the learning situation which are conducive to such growth. Carl Rogers (1969, 1974) has written a considerable amount on teacher characteristics. His beliefs have been widely accepted and

have served as the basis on which others have built. For these reasons his views concerning teacher characteristics will be presented. The works of other authors and researchers will be cited in the discussion of the characteristics of optimum learning situations.

### *Teacher Characteristics*

According to Rogers (1969, 1974) a teacher is a facilitator of learning, and the facilitation of learning is the aim of education. The key to the success one has in this position is to a large measure dependent upon the interpersonal relationship which is established between those who occupy the roles of teacher and student. Abinum (1977), Bridges (1973), and Moustakas (1966) share with Rogers the belief that the relationship which exists between teacher and student is of paramount importance in determining the success of the educational process. To these writers there are important teacher characteristics which influence the establishment of this relationship. These aspects or attitudes are genuineness, acceptance, and understanding of the student.

*Genuineness of the teacher.* It is Rogers' (1974) view that the *realness* of the

teacher is the most basic of the attitudes which one must have:

When the facilitator is a real person, being what he is, entering into a relationship with the learner without presenting a form or a facade, he is much more likely to be effective. This means that the feelings which he is experiencing are available to him, available to his awareness, that he is able to live these feelings, be them, and able to communicate them if appropriate. (p. 106)

Before a teacher can be genuine with students the teacher must know who one is and bring the self to the classroom as fully as possible. Moustakas (1972) believes that it is essential that the teacher attempts to do this if one is to encourage the kind of learning situation that will allow for the development of students as whole persons. This notion of the teacher's responsibility to bring oneself to the classroom is important as it is directly related to the common misconception that teacher's who adhere to this view function in classes which have little leadership or structure and which allow the students almost total freedom.

Rogers (1969), in presenting a description of how he taught a class, presents a more accurate view of the role of the teacher. Rogers reports that he informed his students of his ideas, interests, and expectations regarding the class; told them of the resources he could make available; and provided a list of relevant readings. He was present in the learning situation not as a nonentity but as a contributing, interacting, responsible individual who came into a direct personal encounter with the student on a person-to-person basis. It is Rogers' advice that teachers determine the amount of freedom with which they are comfortable in the classroom and run their classes in accordance with those feelings.

*Acceptance of students as persons.* A second attribute or attitude which seems to be shared by those who are successful teachers is an acceptance of the student

as a person. To Rogers (1974) this acceptance is:

prizing the learner, prizing his feelings, his opinions, his person. It is caring for the learner, but a nonpossessive caring. It is an acceptance of this individual as a separate person, a respect for him as having worth in his own right. It is a basic trust a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy. (p. 107)

Through a variety of means the teacher communicates to the student that the teacher has a genuine caring for the student as a unique individual. This acceptance is unconditional in the sense that it is not contaminated by evaluation or judgments of the student's feelings, thoughts, and behavior as either good or bad. In essence, the teacher accepts the student without placing stipulations. This unconditional acceptance of the student is not to be interpreted as blanket approval of all student behavior. It is instead to be understood as a recognition and appreciation of the student's right to have feelings.

The idea of acceptance of students is a result of the awareness that each person shares some characteristics with others, at the same time in other respects each person is unique. In practice it suggests that a teacher approaches each class with an openness to the experience of meeting with a group of unique individuals. By adopting such an attitude one will necessarily interact with students in ways which will encourage the psychological growth of both the teacher and the students. According to a number of researchers (Brophy and Good, 1974; Good, Biddle and Brophy, 1975; Moustakas, 1966) the most effective teachers are those who accept and stress the unique value of the individual student.

*Understanding the student.* A third aspect of the teacher which has been proposed as facilitating the educational process is an empathic understanding of what

the student is experiencing. Rogers (1969) has expressed the belief that:

When the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reactions from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student, then . . . the likelihood of significant learning is increased. (p. 111)

The purpose of the teacher's empathic understanding is to foster the student's experiencing of feelings more deeply and intensely, and to enhance the student's awareness and understanding of those feelings. It is a function of the teacher to help the student expand one's awareness of feelings that are only partially recognized.

If a teacher can enter the student's frame of reference, can perceive the student's experience and how the student perceives it, then the teacher is considered empathic with the student. Dymond (1949) calls empathy the imaginative transposing of oneself into the thinking, feeling and acting of another and so structuring the world as he does or the ability to feel and describe the thoughts and feelings of others. Her definitions reflect that empathy is an interrelationship between two people and is dependent upon mutual agreement on the experience being shared. This element of empathic understanding is of much importance in determining the success of a teacher in facilitating learning.

As a final comment on teacher characteristics it must be made clear that the possession of these attributes is not sufficient to insure successful learning experiences. What must be present in addition to these conditions is an awareness by the student that these elements exist in the teacher. The students must perceive that the teacher interacts in a genuine manner, accepts the student as a person, and, to the degree possible, empathically understands what the student is experiencing in the learning situation. Without such understanding by the

student it will be much more difficult for the teacher to encourage total growth and for the learning experience to be as enhancing as it can be.

#### *Characteristics of Optimum Learning Situations*

As Rogers (1969, 1974) has repeatedly stated there is not one neat formula which a teacher can follow in order to facilitate learning. Each teacher must discover what approaches, methods, or techniques are best suited for oneself and one's class. Rather than attempt to itemize specific techniques which may produce an environment conducive to the growth of the student as an "entire person", this section will describe those aspects which have been noted to be characteristic of optimum learning situations. The various aspects which will be discussed are emotional warmth, respect, success, and freedom.

*Emotional warmth.* It is generally agreed that an emotionally comfortable environment is highly favorable to student development. Research examining the influence of emotional warmth as perceived by students has demonstrated that a positive relationship exists between teacher acceptance, consideration, and friendship and student performance and self-concept. Christensen (1960) investigated the effect of teacher's emotional warmth on the vocabulary and arithmetic achievement of elementary school children. The results supported the hypothesis that teacher warmth was positively related to student performance.

Spaulding (1964) investigated the relationship between emotional warmth and student attitude toward oneself. Again the relationship was found to be positive, i.e., those students whose teachers were perceived as understanding, accepting, caring, and friendly expressed more favorable attitudes toward self than did those students whose teachers were perceived as domineering, threatening, and sarcas-



tic. It appears, therefore, that those teachers who establish an environment that the students perceive to be emotionally warm succeed in presenting a learning situation which is conducive to both academic and personal growth.

These two studies, and others, have strongly indicated that the emotional tone of the classroom is an important factor in facilitating student growth. This is true for all students at all levels of education, from preschool through postgraduate. When the learning situation is perceived as warm and inviting the student is more likely to commit oneself and grow cognitively as well as affectively (Purkey, 1978).

*Respect.* If a teacher genuinely accepts and values students then one will of necessity treat them with respect and create an environment which is favorable to development. Moustakas (1966) expressed this view when he wrote that "By cherishing and holding the child in absolute esteem, the teacher is establishing an environmental climate that facilitates growth and becoming" (p. 13). Abinum (1977) has discussed at length the importance of respect in any learning situation:

In general to show respect for persons in a teaching situation means:

- 1) Caring about the pupil's viewpoint of the world; seeing him not only as a pupil . . . but also as a person who has purposes, feelings, and inclinations of his own.
- 2) Treating the pupil as a human being who must be respected as a self-determining and rule following center of consciousness.
- 3) Showing a positive concern for, or interest in, the pupil's ends, i.e. helping him to achieve what he pursues in the exercise of his self-determination. (p. 299)

The entire notion of respecting students implies viewing them as capable

and responsible individuals who are competent to make decisions for themselves. In light of this, any learning situation in which the students are respected allows them to control themselves and their behaviors to whatever degree is realistically feasible. Furthermore, if the student is to be respected then the teacher is to be respected also. A teacher has a valid right to expect from students the same amount of respect that one gives to them:

Pupils should respect the teacher both as an authority and as a human being; they should be sensitive to his defects and shortcomings and not take advantage of them . . . they should understand that the teacher is not perfect, that he can fail, make mistakes, get angry, be frustrated, etc. . . . they should try to understand that the teacher's commitments to them are not his only commitments. (Abinum, 1977, p. 303)

When mutual respect exists in a learning situation it is highly likely that the learning experiences which occur will enhance the total development of all involved.

*Success.* It is the opinion of a number of writers (Glasser, 1969; Purkey, 1978; Wylie, 1961) that the single most important action a teacher can take is to establish a learning situation in which students succeed rather than fail. The general view among researchers is that students who fail academically actually suffer twice: first, they do not learn the scholastic material, and second, they experience significant losses in self-esteem. Failure in school leads to lack of academic competence, lowered self-concept, and greater likelihood of experiencing failure in the future. For these reasons it is believed that a learning situation which enables students to experience repeated success rather than failure is the desirable format for education. Glasser (1969) who has written on the importance of being successful in school believes:

that if a child, no matter what his background, can succeed in school, he has an excellent

chance for success in life. If he fails at any stage of his educational career—elementary school, junior high, high school, or college—his chances for success in life are greatly diminished. (p. 5)

Learning situations in which student success is characteristic have many factors in common. Among these aspects one will find that students are granted freedom and allowed to make decisions. Teachers encourage their students through positive messages (written or verbal), and lend direct support to those who need assistance. Such learning environments are not easily established, but they do exist. Typically, the teachers in these settings know their students well and recognize their strengths and weaknesses. Utilizing this knowledge they design tasks which are challenging to the students yet not beyond their competence. By achieving success in academic tasks which one finds moderately difficult, the individual benefits both as a student and as a person. Experiences of success are long lasting influences on cognitive development and feelings about oneself and others.

*Freedom.* It is a basic tenet of Rogers (1969) that learning situations should be constructed in such a way as to allow a student the freedom to learn for oneself. The concept of freedom carries with it that of responsibility. If one is to be free to make decisions for oneself one must also assume responsibility for those decisions. Students grow more when they have chosen or at least had some input into the educational process. Carlton and Moore (1966) have shown that when students are allowed greater freedom both academic performance and self-concept increase.

An environment which allows students freedom permits them to explore and discover meaning for themselves in the materials they are presented. A free academic setting allows students to develop at their own rates in an environment which encourages their self-confidence

and self-reliance. An environment which is free allows students to make decisions which are not always "best" (from the teachers' frame of reference), to question ideas and concepts to which they are introduced, to make mistakes without fear of failure, and to express themselves openly knowing that they will not be rejected.

The concept of learning situations which are characterized by and encourage freedom is very exciting to teachers who are truly committed to facilitating the development of students. To present students with opportunities to learn about themselves, others, and the world around them is both stimulating and challenging, and can occur at all levels of education. It is the writers' belief that when students are allowed the freedom to think, discover, and experience learning situations in their own ways they benefit more academically and personally than when they are directed and "spoon-fed" information. Discovering and experiencing for oneself is a more profitable form of education in that through these processes one not only acquires information but also learns how to learn. This latter achievement is very valuable as it is a skill which will be required and used throughout life.

#### Summary

It has been shown that there are identifiable characteristics of teachers and learning situations which facilitate the development of students as "total persons". If teachers interact with their students in a genuine manner, are accepting of students as persons, and empathically understand them, then the likelihood is increased that the educational experience will be academically and personally beneficial to students. Similarly, if the learning situations are characterized by emotional warmth, respect, success, and freedom then what transpires in those situations will facilitate the in-



tellectual and psychological growth of all involved.

To be a true facilitator of the learning process is a difficult task. It requires not only that one has considerable knowledge of one's area of study, but also knowledge of oneself, of others, and of the dynamics of interacting in meaningful ways. Perhaps what is needed most, however, is the sincere desire and commitment to be of assistance in helping others learn. It is the writers' belief that without this it is unlikely that educational experiences will be as successful, productive, and worthwhile as they have the potential to be.

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*The Allegory of Good Love: Parodic Perspectivism in the Libro de Buen Amor*. Dayle Seidenspinner-Nunez. University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1981. 173 pp. The author seeks to resolve aspects of the controversy elicited by *Libro de Buen Amor* by exploring the intentional ambiguity of the text. Chapter 1 is a brief survey of criticism, and where the emphasis has been that the book as an entertaining comedy. Chapter 2 comprises an extended background study of medieval esthetics and literary modes. Chapter 3 compares the story to its source during the 12th century. In chapter 4 recurrent patterns of cynegetic imagery are observed and where the hunter for love becomes the prey. Chapter 5 focuses on the hunt.