

# Do Teachers Understand Children?

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We have no statistical evidence for the extent to which teachers are able to understand children. However, it seems that many cannot cope with simple forms of disturbing behavior in the classroom because they are unaware of the child's motivations in behaving as he does. Knowing it, many teachers would respond differently.

Some teachers understand children through empathy. They sense what the child wants and needs, and react constructively. Their knowledge and understanding is usually not acquired during their professional training, since the psychology taught in most institutions does not provide sufficient information which can be applied to the classroom situation and to any individual child who does not behave well or does not learn.

This state of affairs is neither the fault of the teachers nor of the training institutions. It is the result of the present state of psychology and psychiatry which are plagued with divergent and often contradictory ideas and theories. Educators have to rely on the data which the field of psychology provides. An autocratic teacher will seek and find evidence for the assumption of an innate goodness or badness, intelligence or dullness in each child. Consequently, he will attempt to "tame" with punitive restrictions all bad impulses he encounters. The more democratic the educator is, the more he will follow psychological theories which assume that deficiencies are due to detrimental experiences of the child, which have to be replaced with better training methods. The more "modern" educator may be affected by the psychoanalytic literature and be inclined to be over permissive, avoiding repressions which may cause emotional maladjustment.

Others may rely on data about learning, growth, and development provided by various, often unrelated, research studies of experimental psychology.

This kind of psychological information does not provide the teacher with insight into the reasons for the child's immediate behavior, nor for the proper psychological responses to it. However, there is one psychological approach which does permit an immediate understanding of any child. It is the teleo-analytic approach, developed by Alfred Adler and his co-workers, which regards behavior as purposive. Whatever the child does, right or wrong, good or bad, is understood by the purpose, the goal, which the child has set for himself.

It may be necessary to explore why the teleo-analytic approach has not been recognized universally heretofore in its extreme significance and value. There is, first, a general scientific resistance, because, historically, teleology was a theological concept; divine scheme set the goal for each man. The modern teleologic concept concerns itself with the goals which each individual sets for himself.

Another reason for scientific rejection of the teleological approach is the element of self-determination which it implies. As long as science was strictly mechanistically and deterministically oriented, there was no room for individual self determination. Man was entirely determined, either by his heredity or by his environment, or by both. Goal-directed behavior assumes free choice, limitations of deterministic influences, whether from within or from without the individual. Such assumptions were totally unacceptable to the scientific world at the time when Adler and his collaborators formulated a teleological approach in psychology. Recent developments in the basic sciences, in physics, and contemporary changes in epistemology point to creativity, self-

determination, and teleological mechanisms as natural phenomena, fortifying Adler's psychological concepts. Other psychological schools move in the same direction, away from a strictly causal determination to the concepts of perceptions and goals influenced by the individual himself.

Teachers who are exposed to a training in the teleo-analytic approach suddenly become aware not only of the child's motivation, but of their own often highly detrimental role in fortifying and supporting mistaken goals. Four characteristic goals are observed behind disturbing or deficient behavior. Every child, as a social being, wants to belong. He can only fulfill himself within the group; within it he is trying to find his place. As long as he is not discouraged, he will seek his place through useful contribution, through conformity or initiative, as the situation may require. He becomes disturbing only if he is discouraged and does not think that he can succeed through his own strength and ability and with useful means. Then he adopts disturbing approaches, still under the assumption that they will provide him with a place in the group.

Such misconception may lead a child either to attract attention, to demonstrate his power to the figures of authority, to get even for all the hurts he has received, or to display real or assumed deficiency in order to be left alone and avoid any tasks where he is sure to fail. These are the four goals which we found in disturbing behavior. A teacher who is not aware of them not only fails to counteract them, but often actually intensifies them by her reaction.

Teachers can be taught to become sensitive to the goals of a child. There is, first, *observation*. In the interplay of a small group of children, teachers can learn by mere observation to distinguish the goals of each child, be it attention, power, revenge, or

display of deficiency. One has merely to observe what actually happens between the child and other children. By seeing what happens, one can deduct what the child intended to bring about.

Once the teacher has a tentative impression about the child's goals, she can confirm it by the observation of the child's reaction to her *corrective efforts*. A child who talks out of turn may do so either to keep the teacher busy with himself or to demonstrate his power to resist her demands. The distinction will be obvious when the child is admonished to be quiet. If his talking was merely a bid for attention, then he will be satisfied with the attention he got and stop-but not for long; soon he tries again to attract the teacher's attention. He will behave quite differently when he is talking for the purpose of defeating the teacher. Her demand for quiet will not move him to stop talking but, rather, to more violent forms of disturbance. After all, he wants to show the teacher that he can do as he pleases, and that she has no power to stop him.

Another reliable diagnostic tool in determining the child's goals requires more skill. It consists of the child's reaction to a *disclosure* of his goals. When asked why he misbehaves, the child cannot tell because he actually does not know the reason; he is not aware of his goals which may be quite obvious to the trained observer. A correct explanation of the purpose of his behavior usually evokes what may be called a "recognition reflex." The child becomes aware of what he does, although he did not know it.

The most reliable indication of the child's goals is at the same time one of the most distressing aspects of the teacher-child interaction. If the teacher wants to know for what purpose a child misbehaves, she merely has to watch her own *spontaneous and*

*impulse reaction.* If she merely feels annoyed and is inclined to reprimand the child, then it is most probable that he merely made a bid for her attention. If she feels deeply provoked, showing him that he cannot do that to her, then he probably just wanted to show her exactly that he can, to demonstrate his power. On the other hand, when she feels deeply hurt, wondering how anyone can be so mean, then she really reacts as the child wanted her to react—namely, to be hurt. And when she is inclined to throw up her hands, feeling that there is nothing that she can do with this child, then he wanted to be left alone.

One can fully appreciate the disastrous consequences of the teacher's inability to understand the child's goals when one realizes that most are inclined to respond to the child's provocation in exactly the way described above. In this way, then, the teacher who tries to correct the child actually does only what the child wants, and succumbs to his intentions while attempting to counteract them. Without learning to understand the child's goals and *to deal with them effectively*,\* the teacher simply is no match for any disturbing child.

The crucial question is how long will it take before all teachers receive this kind of training which seems to be so essential for their ability to deal with children in a democratic atmosphere. Most teachers are fully aware that they need help and assistance, training and information. However, school authorities are less prone to embark on such a new course. It upsets too many accepted standards and principles and would threaten many vested interests, both in teaching and publishing. Therefore, one might be pessimistic about the prospects of such new approaches in training teachers were it not

for the fast-rising awareness that we may be confronted with a bankruptcy in our educational approaches.

The realization of the dangerous state in the field of education is prompted by a variety of events: the Sputnik, the recognition of our deficiency in scientific training, and the rising number and violence of juvenile delinquents. But more clearly pointing to the bankruptcy of our educational procedures is the number of children who make poor social and academic progress, and particularly the increasing number of those who are expelled from school because of academic or social maladjustment. At a time when parents are obliged by law to send their children to school, the schools assume the right to send the children back home because they do not know how to cope with them. The situation probably will become so bad before long that not only the community but also the teachers and the administrators will recognize the need for a reconsideration of some of the basic principles in our present educational system. Then the time may come when new systems which have proven their effectiveness may have a chance to be employed on a large scale.

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\*The technique is described in detail in the author's books, "The Challenge of Parenthood" and "Psychology in the Classroom."