

Self-Confidence for Competence

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Only teachers who are self-confident and competent can work creatively with children and youth. "Self-confidence," this article affirms, "means a trust in self, a faith in one's ability to be able to meet situations as they may arise."

SCIENTIFIC discoveries and their technological application have added to the complexity—and comfort—of modern living. Teaching has become more demanding—and more satisfying—because of these same two factors.

As long as emotional and social factors in learning were not taken into account, the teaching of subjects for skill performance was not intricate.

The sciences of human behavior, with their ever-broadening knowledge of human motivation and action, have involved the technology of teaching even as the discoveries of physics have complicated machines and their operation.

Competence was the goal of teaching when knowledge of human behavior was limited. To be able to perform adequately was considered enough. The job of teaching was considered well done, no matter the method used, when a large number of words could be spelled correctly, when rapid addition of a long column of figures could be performed, when many words on a page could be read with parrot-like accuracy.

Self-confidence, the essential individual quality which determines the ability to use knowledge, was not considered at all. At best, self-confidence was confused with conceit and considered an undesirable attribute.

Self-confidence without competence is of as little use as is competence without self-confidence. Self-confidence means a trust in self, a knowledge of one's limitations and of one's strengths, a faith in one's ability to be able to meet situations as they may arise.

Ability to spell words correctly is competence. Ability to spell and confidence in one's ability to use the words correctly to communicate how one feels and thinks is self-confidence plus competence. Neither is fully useful without the other. Each may be dangerous to the personality without the other.

Dictatorship and Self-Confidence

Dictators and authoritarian leaders have real fear of self-confident people. Success of autocratic control rests in keeping men and women in ignorance of their own abilities, strengths and powers. A feeling of inferiority, of weakness in self, and a need for dependence are essentials of dictatorship in whatever form or in whatever circumstance.

Educational techniques which have their origin in autocratic or dictator-controlled countries, consider self-confidence as arrogance and egotism. They are dedicated to drill for skill and to regurgitation for recitation.

That those who are educated under authoritarian controls are able to recite

but not to think is not surprising. To make use of what is learned, it has to become a part of the inner strength of the person. It needs to be a working part of his reservoir of self-confidence.

Democracy, Self-Confidence and Competence

Democratic living can survive only upon a base of self-confident and competent people educated about themselves and trained in the use of skills which they will need to use. Self-confidence is the trademark of personality developed in a democratic atmosphere. It is a self-confidence without arrogance or pomposity. It is a self-confidence which makes every man and woman a potential leader in his everyday life and in his nation's crises.

Kurt Lewin and his group at the University of Iowa—the fathers of the current interest in group dynamics—verified these principles through scientific experiments.¹

Self-Confident Teachers

Teachers who teach other than by rote need trust in themselves. The poorest teachers are often those who know much about their subject and little about themselves. Their factual training may be excellent. Their human relations understanding may be nil.

Competence, so Webster's *Dictionary*

¹Lippitt, Ronald, "An Experimental Study of the Effect of Democratic and Authoritarian Group Atmospheres," *University of Iowa Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 43-96, 1940. Also, Lippitt, "Field Theory and Experiment in Social Psychology: Autocratic and Democratic Group Atmospheres," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 45, pp. 26-49; 1939. Also, Lewin, Kurt, Lippitt, Ronald and White, R. K., "Patterns of Aggressive Behavior in Experimentally Created Social Climates," *Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 10, pp. 271-301; 1939.

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defines it, is a feeling of fitness, of ability, of rightfully belonging. This can be achieved only if there is trust in self and understanding and insight into one's own behavior. Without this element of *self*, it is impossible to expect understanding of the behavior of others let alone ability to cope with problems of relationship between self and others.

Classrooms, as families, are laboratories of personality interaction. Ernest W. Burgess, of the University of Chicago, has actually described the family as a set of interacting personalities. He might well have added the classroom as another example of interacting personalities. Interplay between teacher and students, students and teacher, and students and students is constant.

Always in human relations in the classroom, the teacher is a dominant element. The personality of the teacher radiating self-confidence and competence—or exuding lack of faith in self and incompetence—may throw the emotional and social learning away from participation into rote recitation.

Teachers, therefore, have a twofold need. They have the need to be self-confident about what they do and competent in what they are doing. At the same time, they have a responsibility to assist the children or youth working with them to gain both self-confidence and competence in their own lives.

Skillful use of information and knowledge for the solution of problems is the aim of all academic training.

Non-directive teaching, in the sense of aiming for absorption of learning, is not enough. Certain skills can be learned only by repetition.

By the same token, drill is not enough. Real learning comes only when skills can be used in a variety of situations. And this stems from the development of a feeling of really knowing what to do, how to do it and when it should be done.

The "either-or" attitude has no more place in teaching than it has in scientific research. The argument that education comes *either* from drill *or* from absorption with no drill is as silly as the argument as to whether heredity or environment is the more important in personality. Both are important.

Rote learning is of little or no value in itself. The "free and untrammelled" development of personality without restraint, discipline or sustained effort—were it possible—is nonsense.

Discipline defined as training—not as punishment—develops self-discipline. Skill in the now famous—and sometimes almost infamous—"three R's" is of no value unless it can be translated through self-confidence of individuals into tools for use in a wide variety of situations and for the solution of all the innumerable problems of living.

Level of Expectation

Perhaps no ingredient is more important to the development of effective living and efficient performance than the level of expectation of those with whom one lives or works.

Charles Horton Cooley in his *Human Nature and the Social Order* describes his theory of "the looking glass self."

And it may be of interest to note that this theory was developed from accurate and acute observation of children.

Each person, so the looking glass theory goes, looks into the eyes of others; sees in them what they expect of him in behavior and performance. On what the one sees in the eyes of the others—or on what he thinks he sees—he bases the way he acts.

What this says to teachers is that the "look in the eyes" should reveal expectation of stimulating, interesting and exciting times together in learning with each other and from one another.

Levels of expectation which are deadening and defeating are those which assume less ability and potentiality than exist in individuals and in the group. Stimulating levels of expectation come from the constant challenge for a stretch to a little higher level of participation and performance.

Another way of saying this same thing is that teachers receive in cooperation, effort and participation about the same quality of each of these that they put into what they do and in about the same quantity they seem to expect from those whom they teach.

It has long been recognized by teachers that if they expect difficulty in behavior, they will usually get it. If they expect boredom and inattention, they usually manage to achieve it. If they expect dead-level performance, they will be so rewarded.

Participation is an important element in this facet of self-confidence. Participation is vastly different from sitting in a group or reciting to a group. Participation means the mutual contribution of each person to the group

and reception from the group of its contribution to the individual.

Variations in Performance

To say the level of expectation both for self and for students should be kept at a stimulating and exciting level is not the same thing as saying that the performance of every person in the group must, should or can be expected to be the same.

Performance varies according to individual hereditary factors as well as to types of environment from which each individual has come. In every group there are "doers" and "thinkers." There are talkers and "quiet ones." There are the group-minded and the lone wolves. There are the erratic and the steady. There are the healthy and those with limited physical capacity. There are the sensitive and the "thick-skinned." There are the immature, the "too old" and the "just normals." But each in his own way can perform, accomplish, achieve and learn.

Every individual has limitations. Every individual has possibilities for physical, emotional, social and intellectual growth.

Performance, to be helpful in the development of self-confidence and competence, must be measured and evaluated in light of individual differences and potentialities.

When mediocrity is expected or accepted by the teacher, performance has little to offer in growth of self-confidence. When performance is measured in terms of perfection which can never be reached even by the most gifted, its relation to self-confidence is negative. It becomes a prolonged experience in

chronic frustration. Teachers who demand perfection in themselves have little self-confidence because they continually feel they never measure up. And they create in those with whom they work the same feeling of inadequacy.

Praise and the "gentle lift" are both important in the growth of self-confidence and competence in children and youth.

Praise and spoiling have long been confused in this culture. Perhaps this stems from puritanical teachings. Perhaps it comes as a carry-over from long years of living under autocratic control in Europe which preceded and forced the settlement of this nation.

Praise for performance and effort in line with personal abilities and limitations is one of the easiest and most effective ways of building self-trust. Spoiling is something else again. Spoiling does not allow persons to take the consequences of their own behavior.

The Span of Frustration Tolerance

Closely related to performance and praise is frustration tolerance. No person can suffer continuous defeat and failure and gain confidence in self or others. Tensions have to be relieved by achievement of goals or new goals must be set which can be reached.

Fritz Redl and David Wineman discovered in their research with boys suffering from emotional and social privation that the span of frustration tolerance in them was exceedingly low. Even waiting for a street signal light to change often leads to aggressive behavior in the group.²

² Redl, Fritz and Wineman, David, *Children Who Hate*, Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1951, pp. 76-78.

Sustained and unreleased tension from continuous failure and from lack of a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment leads to maladaptive reaction to frustration. Frustration tolerance becomes more limited.

All of living is made up of frustrations either of short or longer duration. Motivation of behavior is well explained on the basis of tension arising from frustration in the achievement of goals.

When the span of frustration tolerance is low because of no satisfaction, no feeling of achievement, no praise, no measure of success, negative reactions may be expected. Behavior may become aggressive. Blame may be placed on others for failure. Withdrawal into daydreaming or fantasy offers escape from the intolerable. Regression into infantile levels of behavior and performance may take place. Repression may take the form of denial that there is unhappiness or dissatisfaction. Or the individual may indulge in "thinking which is almost completely dominated by needs and emotions. . . ."³

Whenever teachers face maladjustment as indicated by behavior in the classroom, it is well to check the measure of performance being used by the teacher. Questions to be considered are whether the children or youth are feeling defeated because of lack of recognition; whether their performance is measured by themselves and their ability or by teacher demands; whether

³ Krech, David and Crutchfield, Richard S., *Theory and Problems of Social Psychology*, New York, McGraw-Hill and Company, 1948, pp. 55-59. See also pp. 70-74 for a short discussion of the tension theory of motivation.

personal and environmental backgrounds are being taken into account or whether the teacher's personal and environmental backgrounds are being used as models.

Learning to postpone satisfactions of immediate needs and goals for larger and more permanent satisfactions is a part of attainment of self-confidence. As one high school youth put it, "We need to be sold on the necessities of the preliminaries." And "selling on the preliminaries" is one way teachers have of helping to expand the span of frustration tolerance of their students.

No classroom practice helps more in developing frustration tolerance than the "gentle lift" unless it is skillful and abundant use of praise. Learning from failure is a dubious principle. Learning by learning to solve a problem or by learning there exists a variety of ways to solve a problem is positive in its contribution to faith in self and to competence in performance.

When a child or a youth becomes "bogged down" beyond his capacity to come through under his own power, a suggestion of a new approach, a shift in the problem itself or the setting of a new goal which can be reached should be offered by the teacher. These are the "gentle lifts" of the classroom out of high tension and prolonged frustration into release of tension with a feeling of satisfaction. Moreover, this precludes the "I give up" attitude which is defeating as an emotional habit.

No discussion of frustration tolerance can end without applying it to the teacher's own personality. Teachers, no less than students, sometimes react in a "maladaptive manner" when their own

personal needs and desires are not immediately met.

Aggression on the part of the teacher sometimes takes the form of easy irritability or of continuous negative criticism. Blame of the children's "stupidity" or "poor environment," "indifference" or "wildness" or "lack of interest" are forms of projection.

Austerity and refusal to help in a different situation are withdrawal on the part of the teacher. Temper tantrums, no matter what form they may take, are regressive behavior. Repression is expressed by the teacher who denies anything is wrong when there is unhappiness, aggression, lack of interest, or dull mediocrity in performance in the classroom atmosphere.

And teachers, whose own frustration tolerance is limited, often indulge in emotional thinking about those with whom they work from the administrator through the students on out to the janitor.

Frustration tolerance within a reasonable time span is both an element in self-confidence—the feeling, "I've got what it takes"; and in competence—the feeling, "I can do whatever it takes."

Security and Adequacy

Security and adequacy are two other emotional factors necessary for confidence in self and in others. James S. Plant has offered a valid distinction between the two.⁴

Security, Dr. Plant believes, is the basic feeling of belonging, of being

wanted, of being accepted for *who* one is rather than for what one does. Adequacy is the feeling which arises out of being accepted, praised and recognized for *what* one does. One is a matter of self-confidence. The other is a matter of competence.

Dr. Don P. Morris, the former director of the Mental Hygiene Clinic of Dallas, Texas, and now professor of psychiatry at the University of Texas, Southwestern Medical Branch, has commented that clinics find a child who has been given no feeling of acceptance can be helped to a better adjustment than the child who has no idea of where he stands with his parents or his teachers.

Parents establish the first feelings of security and adequacy in the child. Teachers carry on from there. In the classroom, the effective teacher establishes the feeling of acceptance and belonging in the group for each child and for each child by every other child.

Self-confidence stems from the feeling of rightfully belonging, of being competent, of living up to expectations which have been established by working with, living with and associating with others who have confidence in themselves and in the children and youth with whom they live and work. Self-confidence is not ego-centered. It is group-centered.

Teaching is a complicated business. Its chief complication is the complexity of the human being. At one and the same time this human complexity is the challenge of teaching and the reward in teaching. Facts are necessary for competence in living. Facts plus feelings are necessities for happy and successful human interaction.

⁴ Plant, James S., *Cultural Factors in Personality*, New York, the Commonwealth Funds, 1937, pp. 100, 275-276 and *The Envelope*, New York, The Commonwealth Fund, 1950, pp. 7-28; 167-180.

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