

PERSPECTIVES ON ADULT LEARNING

Some Essentials for School Personnel

Gordon Klopf and George York

"They lived out their lives as in a dream, without knowing who they were or what they were."

J.L. Borges

For many years, teachers, supervisors, administrators and others who worked in schools and school-related settings, were required to take courses in child development. A child of five is different from one of 13 and each is different from one of 18. One was made aware that change, growth, and development occurred during these early years and could be systematically studied. This change, growth, and development does not come to an end suddenly with the onset of adulthood, but continues throughout one's entire life. Those who function as administrators or supervisors in educational settings need to have a knowledge of adult learning and development so they can function more effectively with the adults in their settings.

The adult today is generally healthier, more educated, and longer living than his predecessor. To understand adults one must observe them in relationship to their settings, roles, and involvement, and seen as individuals with feelings, fantasies, goals, and conflicts.

Recent investigations into this "new" field of adult development have greatly increased our knowledge of this important segment of our population. Early study stems from Sigmund Freud, with Carl Jung making the first contribution to the literature on adult development. Erik Erikson has had an enormous influence in the field with his eight stages of psycho-social development in which he views growth as a process of confronting and resolving a set of specific psychological tasks dominating an individual at particular stages of development. More recent work by Gould, Levinson, Sanguiliano, and others further contributes to our understanding of adult development.

Early adulthood is probably the most dramatic stage of all. The individual's physical and mental capacities and biological functioning are at their peak. The young adult is beginning to create a base in the world to be explored more fully in the future. One is separating from parents, gaining independence and searching for an identity—which, although it may mean something different for men and women, emphasizes achievement. During this time, one is also in the process of forming mentor and intimate relationships, a dream, and an occupational choice.

At age 30, the transition often begins with a period of restlessness and uneasiness for both men and women. Demands upon the male are increasing and he is beginning to analyze his life. A woman's search at this time may be similar to that of a young man in his 20s. She starts to investigate her role options and identity. For both, this is an opportunity to analyze, evaluate, and revise one's initial life choices in preparation for the 30s.

The 30s may be the peak period of one's early aspirations. For some it is a period in which one establishes a place in society, becomes more responsible and stable in life, and, at the same time, advances in a chosen career.

It may also be the period of disillusionment of the dream. Some men and women will attempt to redefine that dream; women who have postponed a career until the 30s may now begin to establish a dream.

By the end of the 30s, men, in many cases, are full of doubt and anxiety, while women have a greater sense of self and are more confident.

The 40s may be a more difficult time for men than for women. Women often enter their 40s with a greater feeling of contentment, awareness and self-direction, while

men have a lesser sense of self and more emotional turmoil. Perhaps because a woman in her 30s may have dealt with restructuring her total life, while the man, generally, has been concentrating on his career, these changes in the 40s tend to be more traumatic for men than for women. At this stage, men may become more nurturing, caring, and social conscious, while women may become more assertive, organized, and controlling.

During middle adulthood, one may notice significant changes in biological and physical functions, and changes in living and work styles. This may also be the time for a re-evaluation of one's life, perhaps a re-stabilization and preparation for the future.

Late adulthood may be a time for looking back at achievements and life concerns, may bring a new sense of fulfillment, and may be a planning time for the next cycle of life.

In relationship to learning, some theorists see adults moving from the concrete, undifferentiating, simple, structured, and specific to more differentially, complex, reflective, conceptual, and self determining. Some adults may never move to the latter ways of thinking; and, a task of administrators and inservice educators is to have them do so. However, the potential for continuous intellectual development is present in most adults unless there is brain injury or other physical deterrents.

Can adults learn new ways of social adaptation? Are there personality changes in adulthood? The answer, in general, is yes. Not only are these changes due to biological factors but also to the ability that human beings have to cope with what is and to respond to new challenges which confront them.

"Trust people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being."

Goethe

Helping Adults Change

We have identified six basic considerations for facilitating growth and change in teachers that lead to better relationships and enhance learning in their students.

Clarity of Role Expectations and Needed Competencies

"The task is now to take the risk—
Not just to let others in,
But most of all, to let me out!"

Joyce Irminger

For the adult moving into a new situation, whether it is a new role in a work situation or beginning a training session, the expectations for the role or for the training session need to be made clear. Adults can be wary of the new, and most like the security of knowing where they are going.

The competency movement in teacher education and teacher certification has taught us to clarify expectations. In these programs, role functions are clarified and the kinds of competencies individuals need to perform the roles are specified. Competencies are analyzed from three dimensions: (1) the knowledge needed, (2) the underlying attitudes and values, and (3) the behavior or skills needed.

Staff development programs can relate to school goals and objectives, and specific objectives for subject areas and grade levels. Whether or not the expectations for levels of performance are agreed to by the staff or are derived from the system, they need to be stated. Vague statements about good teaching or improving learning environments aren't adequate to enable adults to learn. There needs to be some specificity of statements of what the teacher is expected to do.

Developing an Awareness of Self

"Would some power the giftee give us
to see ourselves as others see us."

Robert Burns

Becoming aware of what one is like as a person, socially and

professionally, is essential if change and growth are to occur. This may be self-initiated; but, more often, it happens as part of the training and staff development process. Self-disclosure is a part of the process of self-actualization. Too much privacy and repression can stop learning and growth. Enabling teachers to know themselves and understand their motives and goals can be an important factor in inservice education which produces real change.

Since a person's ability to learn is related to becoming aware of one's personal and professional self, it is extremely important that staff development programs include activities for individuals to become more aware of their professional competencies, as well as personal characteristics. Feedback concerning the teacher's classroom performance, which is essential to self-evaluation, can be gained by observation by the principal or other trained persons, or by teachers visiting with each other. Increasingly, participants need to learn to be analytical about their behavior, which should supplement but not replace more objective observation and feedback. Self-disclosure and self-confrontation is not easy, can be very threatening, and should be approached slowly and with great sensitivity.

A small-group experience may make it possible for the establishment of life-supporting mutual trust which, in turn, promotes self-examination and the giving and receiving of feedback on how one is perceived by others. A staff development program might include some small-group interaction sessions with skilled leadership in which an atmosphere of free and open communication is fostered. In addition, there is often need for individual interviews and support for those who have difficulty in handling certain aspects of the process of gaining self-knowledge and in coping with reality.

What the principal or supervisor needs to strive for in a staff is what some have called a reflective consciousness—the ability to transcend the moment, to see it in the context of one's whole set of values and beliefs, goals and aspirations, and behaviors. Teachers need to be helped to become aware of their interior selves as well as being introduced to the visible self as perceived by others. Teachers can be encouraged to transcend the self they think they know. Deep voyages can be taken into their interiors, to get to know some inner space not known before.

"We do not see things as they are,
We see things as we are."

The Talmud

Providing Motivation for Learning

"While behavior is almost always motivated, it is almost always biologically, culturally and situationally determined as well."

A.H. Maslow

One of the most difficult tasks for adult learners is to break through their habitual and rigid reactions and to unlearn their present ways of doing things. The adult's tendency is to avoid that which is strange and strenuous, to be less enthusiastic and less curious than children and adolescents. As persons grow older, they are usually less willing to risk failure. For this reason, they need to anticipate a high probability of success before they will initiate change—particularly those who have experienced many frustrations and disillusionments in previously-new learning experiences.

Moreover, adults tend to solve present problems in terms of what they have done or known in the past. They may appear to insulate themselves from the present. This often results in their having ready-made answers and, thus, appear to do little creative thinking. However, when given new information or faced with dissatisfaction or failure in what they have been doing, many

adults have shown themselves capable of generating new answers, and new cycles of energy.

Another factor in adult resistance to change is the paramount influence of the peer group. Adults' commitment to learning and interest in changing may be dictated largely by what they perceive to be normative expectations in their home, family, and school environments. When the expectations of the setting or group are for growing, changing, and performing one's job more effectively, individuals often show the willingness and ability to change.

Frequently, there has to be some irritant to stimulate growth. Teachers, too, need stimulation and this can be an exciting event, a new policy or law, a special program, or a demanding regulation. The demands of potent community groups can also serve as a motivating factor for learning. Beginning a training session with some of the hard facts on the lack of achievement of children and the accountability of the school, may jolt teachers into seeing the societal needs for educational changes.

Usually the more people have a stake in a program, the more committed and interested they become. Teachers can be involved in the planning of training. They can help set the objectives for the new school program. They can be rewarded for participating. When people have great responsibility accompanied by high status and rewards, they will be more committed than those who have little responsibility, low status, and slight rewards. It might be expected, therefore, that teachers are often less committed to change than principals and administrators.

Commitment to the goal of enabling children and youth to learn involves another kind of commitment—that of the adult seeing himself as a learner, as a self-renewing, inquiring, growing person even at a mature age. The thrust of

training, based on this premise, is to encourage the entire staff of the school to see itself as operating within a learning community. The learning process should be as continuous and open-ended for adults as it is for children.

Gaining New Knowledge, Concepts and Techniques

"The best thing one can do is to cultivate one's garden."

Voltaire

Growth involves new ideas and knowledge, new values and beliefs, and new ways of functioning, behaviors and skills. The sources of these new behavior patterns, values, or ideas, are varied. In the school or educational setting, the principal or major administrator is responsible for encouraging the staff in that which is not only new to them but also significant for increasing their level of performance. The principal or supervisor is an important model and must be seen as a learner, as a person who is knowledgeable, and as someone who has real excitement in the learning process if staff members are expected to see themselves as learners also.

Adults tend to act and believe in certain set patterns until they are convinced of the significance and practicality of some new information or technique. New concepts and techniques will often be more readily understood and accepted by adults when presented in concrete terms and related to pragmatic goals. On-the-job learning may be best suited to the deliberate, concrete, rational, and pragmatic thought processes of many adults. They may learn new educational principles most readily through the analysis of actual situations and specific events. Relevant films, well-planned field trips to other schools and classrooms and demonstrations are powerful ways of learning.

Being involved in activities which permit hearing new ideas and information and then discussing and applying them to their own teaching are the most reliable means of continuing the growth of their intellectual capacities. Adults use the collective intelligence of their culture and society and make decisions with the wisdom and insight which can come from experience. With few exceptions, sustaining an intellectually challenging environment with continued high expectations may cause adults to continue learning throughout the life cycle.

"From this time forth I make you hear new things, hidden things, which you have not known."

Book of Isaiah

The Need for Sufficient Time

"The reality of anything must be limited in time and space."

Isidor Chein

Significant human change requires time. To enable teachers to acquire new competencies there is some indication that a minimum of a year's program with focus, continuity, and intensity is required.

To enable a staff to improve its performance there needs to be individual and group sequences, systematically ordered in both large and small blocks of time. The power of the intensive experience away from the learning setting for an extended period of hours or even days, can be very valuable in providing the time necessary to have adults change.

"All rising to great places is by a winding stair."

Francis Bacon

Opportunity for Experience, Practice, and Reflection

"Where you are tomorrow may well depend on whom you meet tonight."

Sarah Waddington

The acquisition of knowledge or even a change in attitude is not sufficient unless there is a behavior change. Improved performance

requires new experience to accompany the new knowledge. Experiential learning, in turn, needs a cognitive framework to accompany it. Providing this combining of experience and understanding is an important function of personnel involved in teacher development.

The teacher should be encouraged and supported in trying out new ways of interacting with children; listening more, for example. New approaches to individual and group teaching involving less reliance on textbooks and workbooks and more "hands-on experience" laboratory activity might be encouraged. The new activity must be accompanied by the relevant concepts, theory, or rationale.

The supervisory conference often provides feedback for teachers. It occurs when the person responsible for either the training or evaluation meets with the teacher to share what was observed in the classroom. These sessions need to be more than sharing perceptions; they need to be supportive, with personal strengths and areas where growth is needed clarified.

When observation of the classroom itself seems too threatening for a teacher, the more protected environment of the simulation can be used. Role playing can provide an approach for approximating real life, enabling the individual to secure some idea of the possible reaction and responses of others. Case studies, videotapes, slides, and brief film clips also provide opportunity for staging encounters which simulate real experience and allow for assessment of methods and results. Simulation has the value of being non-threatening. It may provide a base for the initial stages of growth but should lead, eventually, to an evaluation of actual experience.

Teachers need supportive feedback on their performance in new situations and a collaborative atmosphere in which to practice new approaches, to analyze their effectiveness, and to try again as often as necessary to achieve positive results. They need the opportunity of knowing how they are perceived by others, if they really want to become more open and authentic. Reflection done by oneself and with others is essential if one is to learn from experience.

"Bad is the day for every man when he becomes absolutely satisfied with the life he is leading, with the thoughts he is thinking, with the deeds he is doing; when there is not forever beating at the doors of his soul some great desire to do something larger which he knows he was meant and intended to do."

Phillip Brooks

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