

# Measuring and Modifying Behavior Of Special Education Teachers

by *Burton Blatt*

*ABSTRACT.* This article discusses certain of our convictions relative to the preparation of teachers and the relationship between that preparation and their teaching practices. Specifically, we concern ourselves with the measurement of teacher behavior and one methodology designed to modify that behavior. Based on our observations of special class teachers in training and in a variety of pedagogical settings, recommendations are made that may aid in the more effective and direct measurement of teacher behavior and analysis of teacher success. Further, a seminar is described that is designed to more recognizably and effectively than heretofore modify the behavior of students preparing to work with children having special learning problems.

For a number of years, my colleagues and I have concerned ourselves with teachers, their preparation, and the relationship between their preparation and their pedagogy. This concern led us to conclude that teacher preparation is—at least to an extent—an unstudied problem (Blatt, 1959; Sarason, Davidson & Blatt, 1962; Blatt, 1964). This is not to imply that educators have denied the existence of the problem; nor does it mean that a great deal has not been written and done about it. Finally, it is not our intention to deal harshly with their work. For, as a matter of plain fact, we too share responsibility for the state of teacher education and the lack of clarity surrounding it.

As we have stated elsewhere, teacher preparation is an unstudied problem because our efforts to study it have centered about one or another position; we have attempted to exam-

ine teacher preparation in the light of our biases and insights rather than in the ways these programs constitute a relevant and adequate preparation for those activities a teacher engages in and those problems he encounters. We have lacked the kinds of detailed descriptions of "live" teaching by means of which we gain a better understanding of what may be considered proper or improper approaches to agreed on goals. We have lacked detailed descriptions of how teachers are actually prepared. We have had an abundance of attractive course descriptions, unassailable statements of aims and hopes, and vague generalizations of what the future teacher is experiencing and learning in the course of preparation.

What we need to know is not only to what the student in training is exposed but the specifics of how it is structured, who structures it, and the role of that student. Without detailed descriptions of what actually goes on between student and college teacher and between student and the master teacher to whom he is assigned, it is

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impossible to judge whether the theory (if there is one and too frequently there is not) giving rise to preparation practices is actually being reflected in how these practices are being implemented. What is so distressing is not only that the theory and practices of preparation frequently bear little relation to each other but that neither bear a strong relationship to the everyday tasks of the teacher.

### Assumptions and Beliefs

It is the purpose of this paper to mention and discuss briefly two aspects central to any confrontation with the problems of teacher preparation: the measurement and modification of the behavior of teachers. We assume that the prime task of the teacher—any teacher, including the teacher-educator—is to measure the behavior of his pupil and to influence its modification. This is but another way of saying the teacher concerns himself with learning, its measurement, and the interventions designed to promote increments in learning.

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### *about the author . . .*



Burton Blatt, Ed.D., is the chairman of the Special Education Department of Boston University. A former teacher of the mentally retarded in New York City, Dr. Blatt has served in a variety

of appointed and consultatory posts. In 1959, Governor Ribicoff appointed him to the Connecticut State Advisory Council on Mental Retardation. He also served, at the request of Governor John Volpe, on a state council on problems related to mental illness and health in Massachusetts. Presently, he chairs the Education Committee of the Massachusetts Association for Retarded Children and is co-chairman of the state's Task Force on Mental Retardation.

It is our belief that the theme most consistently recurring in the broad field of education and, in particular, in the area of special education is that the kind and quality of the intervention (or program of modification) is trivial to the fact of intervention. Stated another way, we have some rather formidable evidence that the specific ways we modify behavior—i.e. our methods—bear little causal relationship to the changes we encounter in behavior and, further, these changes can be expected because of the presence of an intervention in and of itself. The power of our methods seems to lie in the fact that we take an interest and become involved with another human being and this interaction is of sufficient importance to flood out the effects of the system we employ when intervening.

The importance of the particular method of intervening lies in how we feel about it; if we believe that it will provide for a substantial difference, if we are comfortable with it, and if we are skilled in implementing it, we have more success with this method than with competing ones designed to accomplish the same aim. Hence, for example, the continuing controversy and conflicting data revolving about the teaching of reading and the efficacy of each of the several dozen methods we have available to promote this skill. Hence, our inability, after more than a half a century of experimentation, to state with conviction (and data) either that we have meaningful methods in special education or that, whatever we do, special education provides children with a curriculum experience that guarantees a more suitable education than does placement in regular classes.

From our observation, we can only conclude that special education is special because certain people are concerned with it as a different or special problem and have identified with a particular group of children in

a special way, not with a special pedagogy. By this we mean, we have not noticed unique pedagogies utilized in special classes but we have observed an integrity among certain of these classes that we consider "special" and this integrity centers about the special attention and involvement the teachers bring to the class setting.

It is true that our observations refer to classes for the mentally retarded that we have been involved with, and one might state that other special class programs—for the blind, for the deaf, for the aphasic—employ very specific methodologies to reduce or circumvent learning disorders. However, we believe, in principle, that the aforementioned observation has substance even with these groups. Witness the long standing debate concerning the relative merits of the oral and manual methods for teaching language to the deaf or the different and competing special methodologies currently advocated for the aphasic child.

To continue, from our experiences evaluating special programs in Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and—currently—Massachusetts, we must speculate that differences between competent and incompetent special class teachers, i.e. between those whose pupils are learning and those whose pupils are not, are not particularly due to differences of teaching methods or formal teacher preparation but, rather, appear to be related to how one group views children in this regard. Inferred from all of the above is the belief that our curriculum and methods in special education and our over-all strategy or design of teacher preparation in special education have importance to the degree that the process of curriculum emergence—not the curriculum—provides for the modifiability of behavior.

In principle, one curriculum design is as good as another and, regardless

of how well a curriculum is conceived and implemented, it is far less important than the interest it generates among teachers and pupils, the degree of involvement people share in the process of its preparation, and the commitment they feel toward it. It does seem clear that some curricula organizations have, in the past, better served to stimulate learning than have others. However, we could develop some fruitful hypotheses to study why these same designs failed utterly in different settings. Our belief is but another expression of the divergent ways we feel all people seek to find their places in a society and the infinite varieties of occurrences produced from any one formal organization.

We have developed certain convictions relative to the preparation of special class teachers. These, we hope, are reflected in our objectives for teacher education, how we aim to achieve them, and our struggles to measure the consequences of our interventions. Very briefly, we believe the dominant preparation in teacher education is concerned with the development of the humanist.

Most teachers enter training programs with strong humanist convictions, i.e. man, his interests, and his development are strong preoccupations of university students preparing as teachers. The teacher is first a humanist; for whatever reasons, his essential concern must be with people. Secondly, the process of teaching requires pedagogical artistry and the teacher is an artist as well as a scientist, applied psychologist and technician. The teacher, especially concerned with the process of learning and change, must struggle with an understanding of himself as a learner. He must evolve his own—not an imitative—style; he must work at his own means to comprehend and control his skills and to express his art.

Our third objective in teacher education is to assist the teacher in

his development as a scientist. It has been said that those qualities that make the human being a great creative force, an artist, make him a very poor measuring instrument. Artistry characterizes teaching; science measures our effectiveness and gives us principles and tools to improve our skills. Teachers must be trained to observe, to discover that what they observe and what they infer must be held separate or an already complex task becomes unmanageable. The processes of observation and inference are strongly affected by the prejudices a teacher brings to the observational task.

A means toward preparing the teacher as a scientist—the clinical experience—concerns itself with helping the teacher understand his prejudices so he may deal with them more effectively. Quite obviously, the student of education who is not a trained and astute observer cannot function as a scientist. Nor can he so function without a preparation requiring sustained intellectual discipline, including a process of continuous self-evaluation.

### Measuring Teacher Behavior

As was just stated, we, as human beings, are poor measuring instruments. The physiological limitations of man to adequately record behavior when added to his need to make true that which he wishes to be true provoke some serious problems in the assessment of our teacher education programs. At this time, all we can do is offer to share whatever thinking and suggestions we have for coming to grips with the measurement problem.

Most people, in measuring the behavior of teachers, tend to analyze the most complex interactions in the classroom. Another strategy, possibly more profitable, is to measure the simplest interaction. The axiom here is that the more you control the environment the more accurate your measurement will be. For example,

may we learn more about a teacher's behavior and its modifiability by carefully recording his interaction with one child under different and clearly identifiable treatment conditions than his behavior with many children in a generalized setting?

Secondly, our measurement of teachers' interactions with children should be concerned more with their "doing" behavior than with their "internal" behavior. As we cannot measure what a teacher is feeling or thinking, we must concern ourselves with his performance. Intentions are important to the degree that they give rise to behavior. In the last analysis, it is the behavior of teachers with children that are the only meaningful interactions we have to record.

Thirdly, our nomenclature is intimately related to the ways in which we analyze the behavior we record. Whether a child is or is not retarded, was or was not cured, whether a teacher is or is not effective, does or does not make progress, are behavioral phenomena that may only be assessed in relation to how we conceptualize mental retardation and its reversibility or prevention and how we define pedagogical mastery and modifiability.

Next, in whatever ways we measure the behavior of teachers, our data are not only a reflection of the teacher's ability but of the methods and conditions around which the teacher was prepared to manifest his behavior. For example, when we measure a student's readiness to teach we are, in addition, measuring the effectiveness of our programs to prepare him for teaching. The axiom here is that method is a function of readiness for modifying one's behavior and, although as we stated before, our methodologies appear incidental to our interventions, no two methods can produce the same effect under identical circumstances. When we explicate a particular set of conditions deemed requisite criteria for readiness to learn words or numbers or readi-

ness to teach, we are merely saying that, given this specific methodology, these prerequisites are required before the methodology may be usefully applied.

With other methodologies, we are confronted with other prerequisites, some more demanding, others less. All things being equal, to the degree that a methodology is a reflection of a genuine involvement, commitment, and interaction of teachers and students toward the realization of a powerful teacher education experience there will be higher or lower readiness for teaching. Lastly, we may more directly measure the effectiveness of teacher behavior by measuring the effectiveness of pupil behavior. If one is interested in analyzing teacher effectiveness, it is relatively less important to center one's concern on the teacher than on the learner. The former strategy may produce very misleading data while the latter seemingly indirect approach must come to grips with the purpose of the measurement problem.

### Modifying Teacher Behavior

Several years ago, we developed a seminar for teachers preparing to work with children having special learning problems (Sarason, Davidson & Blatt, 1962). It was our hope that this seminar, added to our formal more traditional coursework, clinical and practice teaching opportunities, would more recognizably and effectively modify the behavior of our students in the direction of our objectives. Quite succinctly, we provide students with opportunities to observe children—and each other—over a long period of time for the purpose of developing their skills in observing human behavior and formulating relative inferences.

Each week a group of 15 to 20 students convene around a seminar table and, eventually, enter an observation room having one-way vision and monitoring sound connections to

a classroom. Each year our initial remarks to them are, more or less, the following:

As you know, each time we meet, you may have the opportunity to observe a class of young children. It isn't possible to observe a class or any social gathering for even a few minutes without questions popping into your mind or without coming to some sort of conclusion or opinion. The one obligation which you have is to bring into the open reactions to any observation. To the extent that you can feel free to articulate your reactions, you and the rest of us will learn from each other. One of the things you must guard against is keeping your ideas, questions and opinions to yourself because you do not know whether they are right or wrong.

If you do remain silent, you, of course, increase the chances that you will be unable to evaluate your reactions other than in a subjective, private manner. This is an opportunity to learn, by which we mean an opportunity to change your ways of thinking and acting. There may be times when we do not wish to observe children. You will soon realize that you share in both the substance and the physical management of this seminar. It is your responsibility as well as ours to provide a direction for this seminar.

At this time, I will not dwell upon findings previously reported by us in the literature and which the reader may examine at his leisure. It seems more appropriate here to mention something of what we have learned since our original publication. First, there appears to be a characteristic pattern of student reactions within this seminar experience. During the first few meetings there is often confusion, timidity and tension within the group. Students appear uncomfortable in other than roles subservient to their instructors. In a way, they are almost begging to be told about mental retardation, to be rid of their ignorances; and they do not believe they possess ways to learn without the aid of instruction or textbooks.

At some point, weeks later, students begin to understand that they will not be given answers to the problems they observe in the children's class-

room. They begin to see the relationship between their developing observational skills and their powers to approach the solution of pedagogical problems. Later in the year, students sometimes begin to take their newly acquired observational powers and insights seriously enough to deprecate other worthwhile ways of investigation. They begin to make judgments about behavior, lacking all available evidence; and they begin to make new types of mistakes, i.e. errors associated with rashness and, to some degree, over-confidence in one's powers to perceive and diagnose. Usually, the students eventually see the place of observation and inference as a way of scientific investigation and as a skill correlative to others developed during related phases of the teacher education program.

We have learned that our observational seminar is cumulative in accomplishment. Any one meeting with students may not be of particular significance or have particular power. However, 25 or 30 meetings, all devoted to the observation of a single class of children and all centering about the sharpening of observational skills appear to have an uncommon influence on our students and appear to affect them deeply.

We have learned that, from the instructor's viewpoint, the observational seminar is a difficult assignment. Especially during the early weeks, one is tempted to provide answers, reduce

tensions, and prevent pain; for, during the early weeks, tension and pain accompany this struggle of student and instructor to deal with observed behavior and to derive some meaning of value. To paraphrase Maerlinck, instructors and students do not know each other well enough to be silent together and, yet, if the students are not ready to speak about the behavior they observe, it is the responsibility of the instructors to cope with their own anxieties and need for comfort and to wait until the students are ready to ask substantive questions or raise issues of consequence.

Our observational seminar is one method we found important in modifying the behavior of teachers. There is little doubt that our faith in this method has had something to do with both the way we have felt success with it and the way our students have regarded it as an important experience in their lives. On the other hand, it could be said that our faith is the progenitor of our reality.

#### References

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