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A Dynamic Teacher Role

Catherine E. Loughlin and Mavis D. Martin

In light of rapidly developing alternative curriculum models, faculties in many institutions are reconsidering their teacher training programs. Development of leadership and professional staff for new programs seems to require considerable revision of teacher education practices. Reconsideration of course content, practice teaching experiences, and integrity of philosophic opinion has caused painful soul-searching and tedious debate.

In the midst of such struggle one begins to wonder if attempting to decide how to change the program is a case of going at the problem from the wrong end. Would it be more logical to first consider what it is that good teachers do, then try to plan training experiences which help others develop ways to do the same things?

In recent experiences with both in-service teachers and pre-service students, we have struggled with the valuable but difficult responsibility of helping adults who desire to depart from their current practices. Even teachers who are eager to change seem to find it very difficult, and we have had to consider why this is.

As we began to look at alternative models of curriculum, and at the same time at long range staff development, our previous concept of the teacher role no longer seemed appropriate. The linear concept (diagnose, plan, instruct, evaluate), which had served well in our earlier development of competent conventional teachers, did not address many of the new challenges.

Then we began to look at the teaching act as a dynamic, cyclical process which might result in learning for the teacher as well as the pupil. We saw the teacher consciously engaged in the teaching process and becoming increasingly effective in responding to the learning needs of his own pupils. While consciously studying the progress of pupils and events which brought about progress, the teacher's own range of abilities within the teaching process was expanding continually.

We now conceptualize the role of the teacher as a continual spiral of activity and increasing effectiveness, encompassing both a teaching cycle and, as part of the same process, the conscious study and expansion of the teacher's professional abilities.

The total role of the teacher in today's schools has facets other than those described within the teaching cycle. Essential aspects of the teacher role, such as parent relationships, community participation and others, must be examined also for implications for teacher education. Our conceptualization of teacher role in this paper considers only those aspects which we consider part of the teaching cycle.

We identify several basic activities within that teaching cycle. Continued study of teaching through the perspective of this cycle helps us clarify our conceptualization of the cycle and its activities. In addition, it gives a new focus for designing and implementing teacher education processes.

Assumptions Underlying Role Conceptualization

In developing this teacher role paradigm it is assumed that the following conditions prevail in the classroom program:

- a. Child-initiated inquiry is the basic vehicle for teaching-learning interactions.
- b. Both teacher and children are active in initiating and developing learning experiences. Neither plays a passive receptive role.
- c. The classroom environment and all teacher-learner interactions are responsive to child inquiry.
- d. Some self-selection occurs daily (Loughlin et al., 1973).
- e. Sustained, involved, continuing relationships between teacher and children are considered essential.
- f. Each learner must be well known and understood.

Cycle of Teacher Activities

Teacher activities can be described as a cycle in which each step has implication for, and effect on, the next step. The cycle is continuous: that is, there is no closure, because at all times each teacher activity leads to another activity or, in effect, the next phase of the cycle.

A sense of growth is apparent as the cycle progresses. As the teacher carries out the activities of the cycle, his work becomes increasingly refined, moving from global hunches about relatively unknown children to more and more precise responses and preparation for specific children.

During the year(s) in which teacher and children remain together, the teacher role can be seen as a spiral, progressing from global to specific judgments, as the teacher's knowledge of children increases. Thus, within the history of a given group of pupils and teachers, the cycle of teacher activities forms a continually refining spiral. Still a different spiral may be conceived from the perspective of professional development of the teachers. Throughout his career, as the teacher accumulates experiences with children and materials, his own repertoire of teaching interactions and environmental responses grows. His global "best hunches" become increasingly appropriate and focused for children of given ages and backgrounds, as do his responses to specific children in classroom interaction.

Preparation of the Physical Environment

The notion of a cyclical spiral means there is no natural "first" step, but consideration of the physical environment of the classroom can be a good place to begin in examining the phases of the cycle.

The teacher's preparation of the environment is based on consideration of children's behavior. The environment supports inquiry activities by providing tools, materials, and space for activities, so the teacher plans first on the basis of broad ideas about what children of a certain age are likely to engage in or respond to. The starting environment is built from this general knowledge. In this step of the cycle,

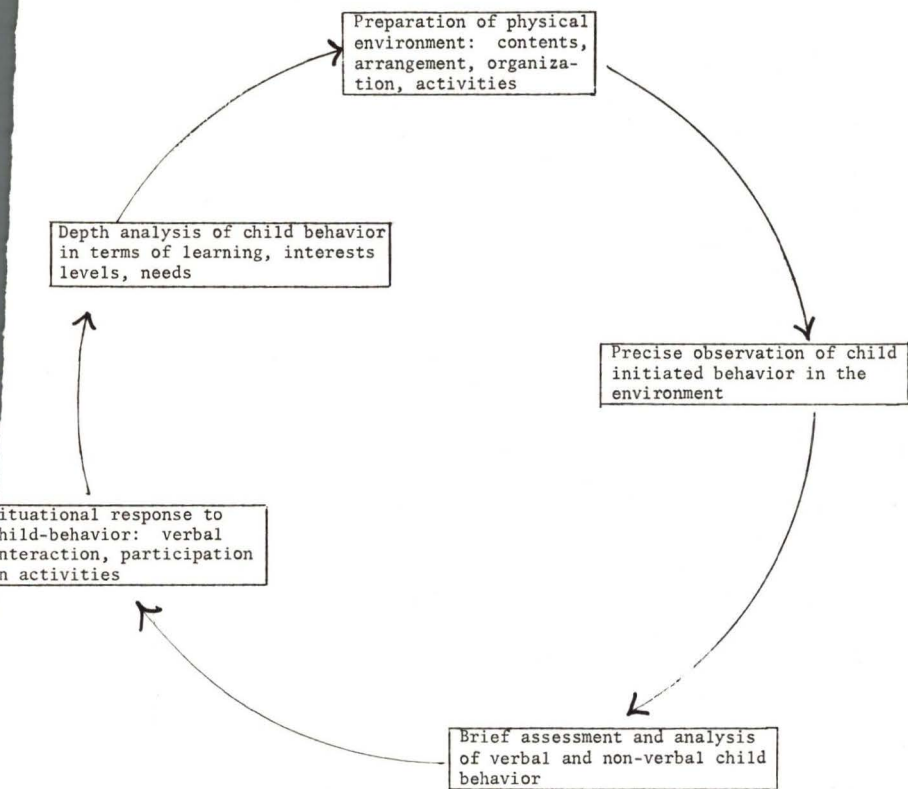


Fig. 1. Cycle of Teacher Activities.

knowledge of child behavior is a more effective basis organization than consideration of categories of knowledge. (Children build, observe, chart, measure, carry water. They do not arithmetic, science, or phonic.)

A teacher returns to this step frequently as he works with a given group, introducing new materials and activities into the environment, or rearranging existing elements of the environment on the basis of increasing knowledge. He uses his knowledge of specific children to continually prepare the environment for their inquiry.

The teacher's professional experiences and development will affect also the power with which he uses the environment. The more he has encountered, interacted, analyzed, actively studied materials, patterns of organization and children's work, the more effective his best hunches and analytical decisions will be. Continued engagement in this aspect of teaching enables the teacher to build an internal repertoire of environmental responses.

Observation of Child Behavior

The teacher engages in a highly specific, conscious observation which goes beyond the generalized acknowledgement of activities "most" children of his group undertake. Precise observation involves a level of awareness not ordinarily used in traditional teacher roles. Such observation involves listening to specific language of individuals, and exact noting of the actions and operations of individuals.

Beginning with a new group of children, the teacher may select particular information or a particular child for observation focus. As the group continues and teacher information accumulates, that knowledge enables even more precise observations of individual children.

Brief Assessment and Analysis

One of the characteristics of this teaching role is a self awareness, a consciousness of interacting during the course of a day. For this, constant analysis of children's actions and language must be a partner to the teacher's responses to children.

The teacher assesses children's behavior in terms of skills, mental operations, information, or affective needs for personal teaching responses during the flow of the day.

As the teacher continually watches and interprets behavior in order to make appropriate responses, the responses become increasingly accurate. Each behavior observed, considered in the context of the child's other behaviors, becomes more meaningful. Each cycle of the teacher role increases the quality of the brief analysis. Through long term professional growth, experience and continual study, with analysis, increases the accuracy of interpretation of child behavior, even with relatively unknown children. Growth in this aspect of the teacher role is particularly effective when teachers have opportunity to join others in analysis of children's behavior and cues.

Situational Response to Child Behavior

Almost simultaneous with the brief analysis of children's verbal and non-verbal behavior, the teacher makes conscious, considered responses to children during the flow of activities of the school day. These responses are the heart of the teaching-learning interaction of the classroom. They occur within the framework of the moment, in those situations arising out of the inquiry of involved children.

As the teacher works with a group of children, accumulating knowledge about specific children, his purposeful responses become more precise and effective.

Throughout his professional development, accumulated experiences of responding and analyzing responses to large numbers of children enable the teacher to build a repertoire of responses for varied purposes. Continued opportunity for a study of his responses also increases his effectiveness with both known and relatively unknown children.

Depth Analysis of Child Behavior

Seeking further insights into the interests, human relationships, concept levels, and progress in skills and intellectual processes of learners, the teacher engages in reflective analysis of children's behavior. He examines the language, activities, operations, and

interests of children which were observed during the flow and interactions of the day.

For this depth analysis, the teacher calls upon his knowledge of categories of learning and the concepts, skills, and operations which comprise subject fields. He uses his professional knowledge of human development and the learning process. As he sorts out the meanings of observed child behavior with these tools, the teacher finds direction for his environmental and situational responses. The results of his depth analysis directly affect his work in all subsequent steps of the cycle of teacher activities.

Joining others in analysis of recorded child behavior, or of interaction between this behavior and teacher environmental or situational responses, affects the long range development of the teacher. Just as continued, accumulating experiences for each other step of the cycle increase the effectiveness of that step, experiences help refine the quality of the teacher's depth analysis.

Further, the knowledge produced through depth analysis of child behavior is a powerful tool for increasing the quality of all other teacher activities of the cycle. As a result, accumulating experiences with such analytical study can be a major element in the professional development of the teacher.

Interlocking Teacher Activities

Jackson (1968) and Busis (1970) suggest it is valuable to conceptualize teacher role in terms of those activities carried out when children are present in the classroom, differentiated from those activities carried out when children are not present in the classroom.

The perspective of teacher role as a continuing cycle of activities clarifies this differentiation, as suggested by Jackson. However, although the differentiation between activities in the presence of children and activities in the absence of children can be identified and conceptualized theoretically, these two aspects of teacher role do not, in actuality, exist separately. The two aspects are intertwined, each a necessary part of the other. Neither aspect of the

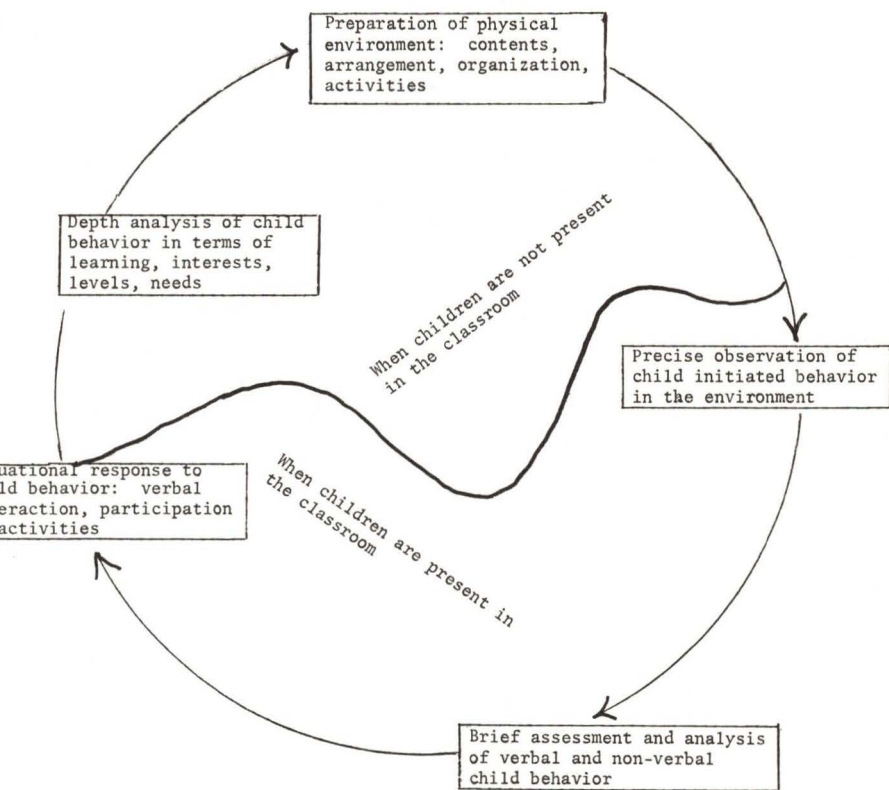


Fig. 2. Teacher Activities in Presence and Absence of Children.

cycle can operate except as a part of the other.

Careful analyses and environmental responses by the teacher provide the stimulation and setting for the teaching-learning interaction. The occurrences and information arising from the observation, assessment, and responses of the teacher are raw data of the depth analysis and environmental decisions.

Some New Questions

Looking at the teacher role from the perspective of a cycle draws attention to a number of questions which we suggest must be considered along with at least some tentative answers in reconstructing new plans for pre-service teacher education.

How much responsibility does a training program assume for providing teachers with tools for continuing professional growth (e.g., techniques for analysis of classroom occurrences, accurate recording of classroom interactions, establishment of a partnership for analysis)?

Should techniques for professional growth have emphasis equal to those techniques needed for operating in the classroom with children?

What proportion of the training program should be focused on training experience for cycle activities in the absence of children, as opposed to training experiences in the presence of children?

Can the selection of content (e.g., in human development, learning processes, etc.) for teacher training be based on an analysis of the specific knowledge needed to implement cycle activities, rather than on the discrete content categories of traditional programs?

Can cycle-related learning experiences be designed for pre-service teachers to include conscious application of teacher knowledge in teaching cycle activities?

How can teacher education give focus to broader teacher role conceptualization including non-classroom aspects such as parent and community relationships?

The identification of a different set of questions for teacher education, growing out of a view

of the teacher role as a dynamic, cyclical process, can give new direction for teacher training. Continued study and clarification of this dynamic role for the teacher could help move us toward improved training experiences to better meet the needs of teachers in alternative curriculum models.

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