

QUIET CHILDREN IN THE CLASSROOM: ON HELPING NOT HURTING

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Most teachers enter the profession to help students. Yet, with the possible exception of parents, teachers have an unparalleled potential for harming young people. Unfortunately, that potential is realized far more often than we might think.

Almost without exception kindergarten teachers tell me how delightful the little ones are when they first enter school. I am told that almost all of them are warm, affectionate, and anxious to learn. On the other hand, many secondary teachers tell me how miserable many of the young people are by the time they reach their classes. They are described as cold, unresponsive, and hostile to learning. The consistency with which these comments are repeated has led me to pose a question to students in my graduate classes in instructional communication: "What have we as a profession done to produce this change in young people?" Although blame is cast at many factors—society in general, TV, peers—almost everyone has to concede that the teaching profession must admit to a major share of the blame, at the very least.

While there are many things that teachers do that harm children (for the most part unknowingly, not maliciously), I want to restrict my comments here to things that teachers can do or avoid doing to help one portion of our young

people, the quiet ones.¹ After working with over five thousand in-service elementary and secondary teachers over the past eight years, I am convinced of two things: (1) most are not consciously aware that there are significant numbers of quiet children, and (2) their "common sense" leads them to employ methods of "helping" quiet children that have a much higher probability of producing harm than help.

Several years ago Daly and I reported a study that indicated the extent of the negative perceptions that teachers have of quiet children.² Since then we have replicated that study time after time as a classroom exercise in our graduate classes for in-service teachers. The results are always the same. The striking thing is that the teachers do not realize why they respond as they do. This does not deny that the teachers have negative expectations of quiet children, but it does indicate that, for the most part at least, these negative expectations exist below the level of conscious awareness. This suggests that teachers' behavior toward quiet children probably is habitual rather than adapted to the individual

¹ For additional information concerning the problems of quiet people, see James C. McCroskey and Virginia P. Richmond, *The Quiet Ones: Shyness and Communication Apprehension* (Dubque, Iowa: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, 1980). For specific applications to the classroom see, James C. McCroskey, *Quiet Children and the Classroom Teacher* (Falls Church, Va.: SCA, 1977).

² James C. McCroskey and John A. Daly, "Teachers' Expectations of the Communication Apprehensive Child in the Elementary School," *Human Communication Research*, 3 (Fall 1976), 67-72.

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child. When asked what one should do to help a child that is quiet, the most frequent suggestion of the teachers with whom I have worked is to "give them more speaking experiences." While this approach may be helpful to some people, it is very likely to be harmful to most. Not all quiet children are alike.

TYPES OF QUIET CHILDREN

All quiet children have only one thing in common—they are quiet. Beyond that, they are as different from one another as any other group of human beings. If we wish to help quiet children, then, we need first to be able to determine why they are quiet and whether they *need* help. Let us consider some of the factors that result in a quiet child.

LOW INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

The research that Daly and I have reported indicates that teachers perceive quiet children to be less intellectually capable than their more verbal peers. Essentially this is a stereotypical response. Like most other stereotypes, it has some basis in fact, but not enough to justify the general expectation. While there is no meaningful general correlation between quietness and intellectual ability, some children who are verbal when they enter school become more quiet as they discover that they are not as good at school work as most of their peers. It is quite normal for Johnny to refrain from volunteering to read before the class if he knows he is a poor reader. Nevertheless, this factor accounts for only a small part of the variability in verbal output of young people. Remember, there still are a lot of stupid, verbal people in the world!

SKILL DEFICIENCIES

Many children have inadequate communication skills. Some of these have

late developing language and/or speech problems. Others may have adequate language and speech production but are severely deficient in social communication skills. Many are verbal during the pre-operational stage of their development but become quiet as they approach adolescence because they become sensitive to their communicative inadequacies. If not overcome, this may become a life-long problem.

SOCIAL INTROVERSION

Socially introverted people prefer being alone to being with others. Social introversion appears to be a fairly firmly established element of an individual's personality which is developed in the preschool years and continues throughout adult life. Social introverts typically can communicate when they want to but more frequently choose to remain quiet.

SOCIAL ALIENATION

Some young people, particularly as they reach the secondary school years, become alienated from their society and its values and goals. They are likely to be quiet in the classroom (or absent!) because they see no rewards forthcoming from communicating. These young people are, by far, the most difficult for the teacher to help.

ETHNIC/CULTURAL DIVERGENCE

The North American society encompasses a wide variety of ethnic and cultural groups. Among these there is great diversity in communication norms, language, accent, and dialect. When a young person is placed in a classroom in which he or she represents a minority culture, the person is likely to become very quiet. While such persons may have adequate or even superior communication skills to survive in their own

subculture, they may be extremely deficient in the skills needed in their new environment.

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

Communication apprehension is an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons. As many as one young person in five may experience communication apprehension, generally, across all or nearly all communication situations. Many others have apprehension about one or more specific communication situations, the classroom being but one environment which can produce this feeling. People who are anxious or fearful about communicating generally become quiet or avoid the situation entirely if they can. Although some young people enter kindergarten with a high level of communication apprehension, the number of highly apprehensive young people does not reach adult norms until around the fourth or fifth grade level.³

LOW SOCIAL SELF-ESTEEM

Many young people, particularly during adolescence, feel that they are incapable of relating successfully with others in their environment. This feeling is most probably generated by a combination of the factors we have discussed above. Such young people typically consider themselves to be "shy" and remain quiet in most social situations, the classroom being a social situation for people of this age group.

ON HELPING

The first step in helping the quiet young

person is to try to discover why the person is quiet. Ethnic/cultural divergence probably is the easiest reason to identify. Communication apprehension also is fairly easy to diagnose.⁴ Some skill deficiencies are easy to diagnose, others are more difficult. Degrees of social introversion and social alienation are very difficult to ascertain without formal personality testing, which usually is beyond the classroom teacher's authority. Low social self-esteem can best be discovered in a private interview, if the teacher has a good relationship with the young person. Presuming we can determine the factor or factors that are causing quietness, let us consider what we can do to be of the most help.

THE SKILL DEFICIENT

The obvious answer to a problem of skill deficiencies is a skills training program. Unfortunately, not every teacher is prepared to develop such a program. Problems of delayed language development and speech pathologies must be referred to the appropriate specialists elsewhere in the school system. Serious harm can be done by well-meaning but unqualified people trying to help young people with these problems. Similarly, few teachers are qualified to develop a training program for young people who have inadequate social communication skills. Specialists in interpersonal communication are needed to guide such programs. Not even speech and English teachers, unless they have had special training in interpersonal skill development, are in a position to help. The answer, then, is to do *nothing* unless you have the necessary special training. Refer

³ James C. McCroskey et al., "Teacher Communication Orientations and the Development of Communication Orientations among Elementary School Children: A Modeling Explanation," Paper presented at the ICA convention, Philadelphia, 1979.

⁴ For a measure for elementary and junior high school students, see McCroskey, *Quiet Children* or McCroskey et al. For a measure for older children and adults, see James C. McCroskey, "Validity of the PRCA as an index of Oral Communication Apprehension," *Communication Monographs*, 45 (Aug. 1978), 192-203.

the young person to someone who can help. Otherwise, leave a bad situation alone. Don't make it worse.

THE SOCIALLY INTROVERTED

Most social introverts do *not* have a problem. While those of us who are extroverted may think they do, they are not likely to agree with us. Teachers should take steps to avoid causing the social introvert a problem in the classroom, steps we will outline later, but they should not try to change the young person's personality. Not only are teachers not qualified to engage in such psychological manipulation, but also, if they try, they are treading on dangerous legal ground and are likely to produce a very hostile young person. The answer, then, is leave the social introvert alone.

THE SOCIALLY ALIENATED

It is virtually impossible for the classroom teacher to help the socially alienated. Professional help is needed, but even that provides no guarantee for success. Many socially alienated young people have the potential to move from the point of being nonsocial to being antisocial. A well-meaning but unqualified teacher can hasten this transition by inept interference. The answer, then, is leave the socially alienated alone. They have a problem, but we can't solve it.

THE ETHNICALLY/CULTURALLY DIVERGENT

Unlike the types of quiet young people discussed above, the regular classroom teacher can take positive steps to help this type of quiet person. The first step is to become acquainted with the cultural norms for communication of that young person. This will enable the teacher to distinguish between behavior that is

normal for that young person and what would otherwise be seen as disruptive behavior (e.g., back channeling by many black students). This is not much to ask of any well-intentional teacher, but is a step taken by only a small percentage. The second step is to assure the young person that her or his communication is *acceptable* to the teacher. While it is desirable for all students to learn so-called "standard" American speech, a young person's speech pattern is very central to that person's personality. Evaluation should never be made on factors, such as accent or dialect, that are not within the young person's control to change rapidly. Third, every effort should be made to encourage other students to accept the communication patterns of this type of young person. Nothing can be more painful than jeering by peers. The teacher should never tolerate such behavior. Finally, the teacher should consider the presence of the ethnically/culturally divergent an opportunity to broaden the education of all of the students. Encouraging the ethnically or culturally divergent young person to discuss an idea or issue from the vantage point of her or his culture will strengthen self-esteem and also make the young person more socially acceptable to the peer group.

THE COMMUNICATION APPREHENSIVE

The young person with high communication apprehension can be helped. The method that has been found to be most effective and to require the least professional training for the teacher is systematic desensitization.⁵ Programs for such treatment are low in cost and should be made available in all schools. Short of providing such a program, we

⁵ James C. McCroskey, "The Implementation of a Large Scale Program of Systematic Desensitization for Communication Apprehension," *Speech Teacher*, 21 (Nov. 1972), 255-64.

should not expect the classroom teacher to be able to help a young person overcome communication apprehension. Giving this type of quiet young person increased speaking experiences or even providing communication-skills training is more likely to make the problem worse than to be helpful. Both approaches can be very helpful, but only after the fear and anxiety problem is overcome.

It should be recognized that many quiet young people are quiet for more than one reason. The most common combination of causes is communication apprehension and skill deficiencies. As we noted previously, such people are likely to develop low self-esteem and consider themselves shy. Helping these young people requires treatment for their communication apprehension (first) and appropriate skills training. Either one without the other will not overcome the problem.

ON NOT HURTING

Helping the quiet young person requires the active participation of the classroom teacher. In situations where the teacher is unable to do what is necessary to help, it is still possible to take several steps to avoid hurting the quiet student. Harm can come in two main ways: (1) making the young person even more quiet, and (2) allowing the quietness to interfere with the young person's learning and achievement. Below are several steps the teacher can take to avoid these harms.

DEVELOP A COMMUNICATION-PERMISSIVE CLASSROOM

If communication with other students and with the teacher is unrestricted, it is much more likely that a student, even a quiet one, will engage in communication. Such a climate is developed when a teacher reinforces students for com-

municating with others. While this type of classroom atmosphere also encourages some conversations which are not directly conducive to learning, the overall impact is supportive of the learning process for all students, not just the quiet ones. An important consideration in this type of classroom is avoiding punishment of communication. Communication itself should never be the object of punishment. Disruptive behavior, of course, must be controlled. However, the teacher must make clear to all students that it is disruption that is being punished, not communication. Otherwise, quiet students, particularly those with high communication apprehension, will observe others being punished for communicating and will learn that if they keep quiet they can escape this punishment.

ENCOURAGE, NOT REQUIRE, ORAL PERFORMANCE

The use of oral performance in the classroom is a valid and important instructional strategy. However, what is valuable and beneficial to some children is not necessarily so to others. Forcing highly apprehensive, ethnically divergent, or skill deficient young people to perform orally is harmful. It will increase apprehension and reduce self-esteem. Thus, the teacher should permit and encourage oral performance but never require it from quiet students.

PROVIDE ALTERNATIVES TO ORAL PERFORMANCE

It is almost never necessary for a student to perform orally to demonstrate learning (the notable exception being oral communication instruction). The teacher should develop alternative methods for the student to demonstrate achievement. Allow students the choice of oral or written forms whenever

possible. Even the teaching of reading does not require oral reading in front of peers. Many reading experts now argue that oral reading is the least beneficial element in the traditional reading program. The quiet student is placed in a very bad position when oral performance is the only alternative to demonstrate achievement. Her or his inadequacies in oral performance are interpreted, incorrectly, as low achievement in other areas.

AVOID RESTRICTIVE SEATING ASSIGNMENTS

Classrooms have high, moderate, and low interaction areas. The highest are near the front and center. The lowest are along the sides and in the rear. One of the potentially most harmful things a teacher can do is to force a quiet student to sit in a high-interaction area of the class. While the student is not likely to talk any more in such an area than if he or she were seated elsewhere, the threat of communication will be felt much more consistently. Under such pressure it is more difficult for the young person to concentrate on the subject matter being taught, and learning will decrease. Allowing students to select their own seats avoids harming quiet students.

AVOID GRADING ON PARTICIPATION

Class participation should be sought and encouraged, but penalties for non-participation should be eliminated. Re-

member: A student who is listening is more likely to be learning than a student who is talking. Grading which is based on participation not only penalizes students who are afraid to communicate but also unduly rewards those students who are very verbal. Evaluation should be based upon what a student knows, not how much a student talks.

A FINAL WORD

Teachers want to help and to avoid hurting young people. The special group of students we call "quiet" can be helped and we can avoid hurting them. The suggestions above are steps in the right direction. They are not panaceas. Our field has come a long way toward understanding the problems of quiet people and has developed a few partial solutions. This essay has attempted to provide advice based on our current state of knowledge. Many more years of extensive research and field testing will be required before we will approach the level of being able to fully understand this problem facing so many of our young people, much less being fully capable of overcoming the problem. In the interim we must do what we can to help and to avoid hurting the young people in our classrooms. We must constantly keep in mind that most of us are moderately to highly verbal people. We are different than the quiet people with whom we work. What makes good common sense to us may be the worst thing we could do for someone who is quiet.

