

Riverside Educational Monographs

EDITED BY HENRY SUZZALLO

PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, SEATTLE

THE OBSERVATION OF TEACHING

BY

C. R. MAXWELL

DEAN OF THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

BOSTON, NEW YORK AND CHICAGO

The Riverside Press Cambridge

COPYRIGHT, 1917, BY C. R. MAXWELL

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE . MASSACHUSETTS
U . S . A

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

A SMALL manual on the observation of teaching will be welcomed by all those in the profession of education who are responsible for the inspection and the improvement of the teacher's classroom work. Superintendents, special supervisors, principals, and training-school teachers will be glad to have a convenient treatise which will offer some direct aid to the conscious appreciation of good and poor teaching.

As things are at present, the observation of teaching is an activity pursued without much system. It is conducted without adequate preliminary or immediate intelligence, and the judgments to which it leads are not subsequently subjected to much critical thought. All this carelessness must be corrected if we are to have a stable method of improving the practice of teaching, one free from dependence on personal intuitions and chance impressions.

Of late we have made some very conspicuous scientific advances within the field of supervision. The profession has evolved standard tests of

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

efficiency in many subjects, and developed more or less accurate statistical means of measuring student achievement under given forms of instruction. Yet no amount of zeal for scientific educational judgments can blind us to the fact that practically all these recent contributions to the science of ascertaining efficiency are long-range methods. However accurate these may be within the restricted fields they reveal, they are never an adequate substitute for the intimate personal observations of a competent supervisor who lives in the classroom and scans the whole of the educative life found there. Indeed, our contemporaneous measurements reveal inefficiency pointedly and accurately, but seldom do they diagnose the causes and suggest the remedies. They require supplementation on the part of the wholesome and sane supervisor.

Classroom observation must be systematic rather than impressionistic if it is to be valuable. Even educational officers of unusual power rely too largely upon what they may happen to see in the classroom, and what they may happen to see is determined in very great degree by the particular educational doctrines and interests they may happen to have in mind at the moment. The antidote is to be found in an increase of thought-

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

fulness preliminary to the actual visiting of classrooms, in the use of comprehensive classifications of facts to be observed, and in the development of a critique of observations.

The need of an adequate preliminary theory of observation is clearly brought out the first time that a normal school student is sent to observe a lesson in the demonstration school. He scarcely knows upon what to focus his attention. He returns to the class in theory with a mind confused with detail, and he has no method of telling what he has observed save that of ordinary narration and description. In consequence, what he recites is without pedagogical significance. Too frequently such a condition remains uncorrected for a long period, and the time given to observation is practically wasted. The presentation of an outline of facts to be observed, with some discussion of the same, at once gives definiteness to subsequent observations. If the instructor shows the additional wisdom of restricting the beginner to a small number of factors, the observations of the student observer begin to be valuable.

Even the mature and experienced school principal finds that a systematic plan of inspecting his school has great advantages. Ordinarily he is a

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

casual visitor. His moments of freedom from office duties are likely to cover the same periods of each day. The classrooms nearest his office are likewise favored. He scarcely realizes that he is not covering all the ground. In addition, like every other mortal, he thinks of certain considerations more often than others; these he watches, the others he fails to stress. A half-hour's review of a chart or outline of factors to be observed at once redeems him from one-sidedness. He proceeds to watch ventilation, the voice of the teacher, or the social spirit of the classroom — items which he has overlooked for a month.

His work will be improved still more if he resolves to specialize on certain phases for a given period, passing on to others in turn. His inspection may be made by subjects for a time, then by grades, later by aspects not ordinarily suggested by grade and subject classifications. He will be surprised to note how much keener he becomes in his casual observations once he has followed some systematic and specialized method of observation.

The manual here presented will suggest in a comprehensive way the factors which are to be observed in the classroom. It affords the basis for much careful and systematic work useful

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

alike to both experienced and inexperienced observers. Its written aids to observation which follow the more detailed chapters will be a concrete and direct help, particularly to beginners.

PREFACE

OBSERVATION of teaching is considered an integral part of the professional work in most training-schools for teachers. Few definite outlines on the subject are available, consequently the work varies from carefully organized courses to desultory observation by students who are without specific plans or purposes.

This manual has been an outgrowth of the work in a course in observation of teaching, and while in no way exhaustive, the outline aims to present in a very brief form the most pertinent problems. The manual is designed for the use of students in training, for the use of teachers who are desirous of analyzing the various elements in the teaching process, and for the use of other persons who are interested in the observation of teachers at work.

C. R. M.

WHITEWATER WISCONSIN
May 1917

CONTENTS

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION	v
PREFACE	xi
I. THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM	1
II. THE PURPOSE OF OBSERVATION	9
III. THE VALUE OF OBSERVATION	19
IV. THE TEACHER	33
V. THE PUPILS	44
—VI. THE LESSON PROCEDURE	51
VII. THE DEVELOPMENT LESSON	66
—VIII. THE DRILL LESSON	73
—IX. THE REVIEW LESSON	78
X. THE LESSON FOR APPRECIATION	84
XI. QUESTIONING	91
XII. CLASS MANAGEMENT	102
XIII. THE PHYSICAL FEATURES OF THE SCHOOL- ROOM	107
OUTLINE	117

THE OBSERVATION OF TEACHING

I

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

MUCH of our knowledge rests on observation. It is one of the necessary elements in the study of any science, and it is also a requisite in the preliminary preparation for the practice of an art. Its value in the study of the natural sciences has long been recognized, and its use is beginning to be extended in the investigation of the sciences of the mind. We appreciate the dangers of relying on the testimony of the senses, but this error is usually caused by lack of skill on the part of the observer, by carelessness in considering the essential elements, or through failure to realize how fallacies may arise.

Skill in observation, as in any art, is acquired by practice. Observation of mental phenomena, to be of value, must be exact and accurate. It requires patient endeavor on the part of a student to understand the means employed by a skillful

THE OBSERVATION OF TEACHING

teacher to realize the ends he wishes to attain in any class exercise. The observation of children, in order to note their reaction to mental stimuli, is valuable to one who is to enter upon the work of teaching. The opportunity offered for observation of children in the institutions devoted to the training of teachers indicates the importance of the problem. (1)

In an investigation of the professional work that is given in the normal schools of this country, the writer finds that courses in what is commonly called pedagogy have two aspects; one, the theoretical and the other the practical. The former is called by many different names owing to the lack of a definite and consistent terminology in our discussion of educational topics. It is given under the guise of Theory of Education, Principles of Education or of Teaching, General Methods, etc. No doubt the subject-matter, method of approach, and the point of view may be quite the same in each, but the names are not indicative of this fact. Again, the subject-matter of two courses called by the same name may be found to be quite different in their nature. The other aspect, the practical, seems to be more definite in its terminology, as when we speak of observation and practice teaching we have defi-

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

nately in mind what is being attempted, although the means utilized for this attempt may be somewhat different.

Of these two elements, practice teaching is more nearly standardized than is observation, but even here a great variation exists in methods of carrying on the work. The general plan, however, is to have a small group of children taught by a student in one subject, under the close supervision of a critic teacher. The length of time that a student teaches varies from ten weeks to one year.

The results of this investigation show considerable agreement as to aims and purposes of observation; the methods utilized for realizing them vary greatly. In some cases observation is conducted in organized classes following a definitely outlined plan, while in others it is promiscuous and desultory observation by individual students, following no definite outline. The first type of observation furnishes an opportunity for a student to become acquainted with the type of work he is preparing to do. It presents to him the situation in which he may see pedagogical principles applied, and it furnishes an ideal that may be reached by thoroughly trained, experienced persons; that is, if the right type of teach-

THE OBSERVATION OF TEACHING

ing obtains in the classrooms observed. The second type of observation should have little place in any institution. The student who visits a class without a definite problem conscious in his mind rarely sees what it is hoped that he may. Often his attention is focused on the relatively unimportant and thus his observation may be a hindrance rather than a help. If the work has not sufficient content to be organized or outlined as are other subjects of study, it should be relegated to the scrap-heap with other obsolete subjects.

Observation must justify its place in the curriculum of the professional school because it meets a particular need, because it fills a real want, because it makes a contribution to the training of teachers. Unorganized observation holds the place in educational theory that excursions occupied a few years ago in the teaching of geography and nature-study. It was popular to take classes on excursions to factories and manufacturing plants, or on field trips, to see land and water formations, birds and trees, in the hope that something might be assimilated that would be of educational value. When a justification other than a pleasure jaunt was demanded, the advocates found themselves in a predicament. The result has been that we are conducting ex-

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

(21) cursions to-day, but before we embark on them, we realize that our plans must be definite, concrete, and worthy.

Before entering upon practice teaching, the student should be equipped with all the knowledge, both theoretical and practical, that is at the command of the institution in which he is trained. In practice teaching the student will tend to acquire the tone of voice, the poise, the habits of action in conducting the routine of the school, that will persist in his later work. We should strive, therefore, to inculcate the desirable habits at the very beginning of the work. It is a well-known fact that teachers trained along theoretical lines may be cognizant of the principles underlying effective teaching, but yet revert to methods employed by teachers under whom they acquired the knowledge of the subjects they themselves are attempting to teach. Our problem is to relate theory to practice so that theory will function in controlling and guiding practice.

A teacher in training usually has courses in psychology, methods, child-study, which treat of the instincts and interests of children, and the characteristics of mental and physical development. These courses make a study of children and of subject-matter from a theoretical stand-

THE OBSERVATION OF TEACHING

point. The fundamental facts that are common to all children can well be given in this way, but a theoretical and abstract discussion of child nature will not present concretely to the prospective teacher, the living, virile, red-blooded, energetic, resourceful child, that we know and love. Children are the material with which the teacher lives, and to understand and appreciate them, he must view them at first hand. Froebel gained his knowledge of the sacredness of child life, not from treatises about children, but by living with them. We no longer give textbook courses in science. A school that would teach physics, chemistry, or biology from a textbook without making use of the laboratory to explain and make real the phenomena that classes are studying, would soon fail to get support from the public. In our schoolrooms, we have available the best type of laboratory, and it should be as important an adjunct to our courses in educational theory as is the physics laboratory to the lecture-room in that subject. This is a place where the arguments of economy cannot be offered as an excuse for its absence. Separation of educational theory and schoolroom procedure has existed because the people who have exploited theory have had, in many cases, little knowledge of child life,

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

and the teachers of children have had no fundamental theories in regard to their work.

The apprenticeship system is faulty in that it does not give and develop principles that may be applied in changing situations, as there is little attempt to analyze the process. It is efficient in that it demonstrates, objectively, what is to be done and how to do it. To overcome the evils and to retain the good of this system, we are beginning to appreciate, both in the trades and in the professions, that it is desirable to learn the theory of the art or craft before entering upon independent practice.

The teacher needs theory that establishes an ideal. He needs to observe a skilled teacher to appreciate the relation of the ideal to the practical, and finally, when both aspects of the principles are clearly in the consciousness of the prospective teacher, he is ready to take charge of a school. If he is unable to make the adjustment, if his theory does not function in his teaching, if he cannot think through the subject-matter in terms of the students he is to teach, a further apprenticeship in observation of a skilled teacher is needed before independent practice should be permitted.

In his preparation for surgery, the student is

THE OBSERVATION OF TEACHING

given an opportunity and required to attend many clinics where he observes the skilled operator. To supplement his training in the medical school, the young surgeon joins the staff of the hospital in order that he may have further advantages in observation before practicing his art independently. He serves his apprenticeship in observing those skilled in the art he wishes to practice, so that the physical life of his patients may not be jeopardized. Is it not just as essential that the mental life be given as much consideration as the physical? If so, it would seem that a carefully outlined course in observation should be an integral part of a teacher's training.