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PSYCHOLOGY FOR TEACHERS

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Psychology for Professional Groups

PSYCHOLOGY FOR TEACHERS

Second Edition

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University College Cardiff*

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Contents

Introduction to First Edition xi

Introduction to Second Edition xv

PART I THE EARLY YEARS

1 Early Social Development 3

- The child in the home 3
 - The influence of attachment upon later development 4
- The nature of early social learning 7
 - Sex roles 8
 - Ethnic groups 10
 - Social class 11
- The family 13
 - The changing nature of the family 14
 - Neglected children 15
 - Family conflict 16
 - The home–school conflict 19
- Specific classroom issues 20
 - Language and social development 21
 - Gender differences 23
 - Ethnic factors 24
- The home and the school 25
- SOME QUESTIONS 27

2 Play 29

- The purpose of play 29
- The nature of play 30
 - Categories of play 31
- Play and learning 32
- Play and the curriculum 34
 - Structuring young children's play 35
 - Older children's play 36
- Sport 37
- SOME QUESTIONS 38

PART II COGNITIVE FACTORS AND LEARNING

3 Concept Formation and Development 43

- Thinking and education 43
- The work of Piaget 43
 - Stage 1. Sensori-motor (birth to two years) 44
 - Stage 2. Pre-operational thought (2–7 years) 45
 - Stage 3. Concrete operations (7–11 years) 47
 - Stage 4. Formal operations (12 years and upwards) 48

Contents

Criticisms of Piaget	50
Other approaches to cognitive development	52
Cognitive development and the classroom	54
The task of the teacher	54
SOME QUESTIONS	57

4 Language 61

The beginnings of language	61
Encouraging early language	65
Language and the school	66
The role of the teacher	67
The rules of language	68
The importance of language teaching	68
Teacher questions	69
Teacher language	70
Dialects and accents	72
Enhancing language skills	72
The teacher as listener	73
Language games	74
Reading and writing	75
Language and intelligence	76
SOME QUESTIONS	77

5 Intelligence 79

What is intelligence?	79
The measurement of intelligence	79
Intelligence testing – origins and later developments	81
Models of intelligence	85
The measurement of general intelligence ('g')	86
The usefulness of 'g'	87
Can IQ be enhanced?	88
Coaching for IQ tests	89
IQ tests and the teacher	90
Improving intelligence	91
Intelligence and thinking	93
Is intelligence inherited?	94
Twin studies	96
Other studies	98
The approaches of Hebb and Cattell	100
Intelligence and ethnic groups	101
Intelligence and socio-economic factors	103
Urban and rural differences in intelligence	104
Gender differences in intelligence	104
SOME QUESTIONS	107

6 Creativity 111

What is creativity?	111
Lateral/divergent thinking	111
Creativity and intelligence	112
Divergent thinking tests	114
The creative act	115

Creativity and the school	118
Encouraging divergent thinking	118
Classroom organization and creativity	119
Creative teaching techniques	120
SOME QUESTIONS	123

7 Learning 125

What constitutes learning?	125
Theories of learning	127
Operant conditioning	127
Instrumental conceptualism	128
The nature of the learner	131
Affective factors	131
Motivation	133
Age, gender and social factors	134
Memory	136
Study habits	138
The nature of the material to be learned	140
The cognitive domain	141
The affective domain	143
The psychomotor domain	143
Assessment	144
The nature of the learning process	146
Managing the learning process	150
Precision teaching	150
The 'slow learner'	151
Children with low IQ scores	152
Teaching children with low IQ scores	154
Children retarded in achievement	155
Helping children retarded in achievement	158
SOME QUESTIONS	161

PART III AFFECTIVE FACTORS

8 Personality 167

The origins of personality	167
The role of parents	169
The enduring nature of temperament	169
Approaches to personality	170
Ruler or thermometer?	171
Personality traits	171
The work of H.J. Eysenck	172
The work of R.B. Cattell	173
Pros and cons of the trait-based approach	174
Personality traits and learning	175
The extraversion-introversion dimension	175
The neuroticism-stability dimension	176
The trait-based approach and individual differences	178
Modifying personality traits	179
Personality and academic success	180
Cognitive style	181

Contents

Theories of cognitive style	182
Cognitive style and learning	186
Personality states	186
Arguments against permanence in personality	187
Telic–paratelic behaviour	188
The state-based approach and counselling	189
The psychodynamic approach	190
Sigmund Freud – the id – the ego – the super ego – ego	
defence mechanisms – three kinds of anxiety	190
Personality and motivation	195
Motivation and reinforcement	196
Maslow's theory of motivation	196
Locus of control	198
The teacher's reaction to success and failure in children	199
Mood	200
Teachers have moods too	201
Interest	202
Attitudes	204
Attitudes and ego defence	205
Attitudes and behaviour	206
Cognitive dissonance	206
Attitude change	207
SOME QUESTIONS	210

9 Values and Moral Development 213

What are morals and values?	213
The origins of value systems	213
Kohlberg's six stages of moral development	215
Measuring moral development	216
Criticisms of Kohlberg	217
The role of the teacher	218
Some specific moral problems	219
Teaching moral behaviour	221
SOME QUESTIONS	222

10 The Self 225

Defining the self	225
What determines the self?	227
The importance of learning in self-concepts	227
Can we know our real self?	228
Carl Rogers's theory of self	229
Conflict between the <i>organism</i> and other people	230
Measuring the self	231
George Kelly and the self	232
Constructs can be changed	236
Self-esteem	236
The development of self-esteem	236
Causal factors in self-esteem	238
Value to the teacher	238
Other influences on self-esteem	239
Encouraging self-esteem	240
Self-esteem is not the same as conceit	241

Assessing self-esteem	242
Self-esteem and overassertion	243
Self-maturity	243
Erikson's eight stages and personal maturity	244
Children's ages and Erikson's stages	245
Self-maturity and the school	246
Defining the mature personality	247
Self-identity	248
Learning to be adult	249
Understanding the adolescent	250
Role confusion	251
Knowing and being	252
SOME QUESTIONS	253

PART IV SOCIAL INTERACTION, TEACHER-CHILD RELATIONS AND TEACHER PERSONALITY

11 Social Behaviour and Social Skills 259

Dyadic interactions	259
Social interaction between teacher and child	262
Social status	262
Social status and the school	265
Unnecessary assertion of teacher status	266
Social conformity	266
Non-conformity	267
The peer group	269
The school and conformity	270
The lesson as a social encounter	270
Teacher awareness of social interaction	271
The five-step episode sequence	273
The nature of communications	274
Interaction analysis	275
Social roles	278
Role conflict	279
Social learning and role models	280
Copying role models	282
Friendship patterns in the classroom	283
Classroom subgroups	284
Unsuitable friendships and the friendless child	285
The popular child	286
Sociometry	287
Social skills	288
Assertiveness	289
Assessing and responding to social situations	290
The right atmosphere for social skills training	292
Lessons learnt from role playing	293
The importance of social warmth	294
The place of self-disclosure	294
SOME QUESTIONS	296

12 Educational Guidance and Counselling 299

- Counselling in school 299
 - The problem of confidentiality 300
 - The importance of sympathy 302
- The counselling process 303
 - Categorizing the child's problem 303
 - The role of the counsellor 304
 - Problems facing the counsellor 306
 - Social forces and conflicts 307
- Vocational guidance 309
 - Developmental stages in career choice 310
 - The role of the counsellor in vocational guidance 311
 - Vocational guidance tests 313
- SOME QUESTIONS 314

13 Class Control and Management 317

- Problem behaviour 317
 - Defining problem behaviour 317
- Behaviour modification techniques 319
 - The origins of undesirable target behaviours 320
 - Identifying both sides of the problem 322
 - Objections to behaviour modification techniques 323
 - The token economy 326
 - General points on behaviour modification 328
- Other aspects of class control and management 329
- The application of punishment 335
 - Effective sanctions 335
 - The law of natural consequences 337
- Group behaviour problems 338
- Physical confrontation 339
- School refusal 340
- SOME QUESTIONS 342

14 Teacher Personality and Characteristics 345

- Teacher effectiveness 345
 - Assessing teacher characteristics 346
 - Emotional security in the teacher 348
 - Teacher attitudes 349
 - Teacher styles 350
 - The value of teacher talk 351
 - Introducing variety into teaching methods 352
 - Flexibility 353
- Teacher stress 353
 - How to handle stress 355
- SOME QUESTIONS 358

Introduction to First Edition

The purpose of this book is to acquaint the reader with those areas of psychology of most practical value to the teacher. It deals, therefore, not only with matters relating directly to the classroom, but with matters pertaining to the child's background outside school and to his or her own self-perceptions and self-concepts. The teacher's task can only be clarified if he or she has a knowledge of children as complete persons rather than simply as individuals who spend the hours from nine o'clock until four sitting in classrooms. The child's personality, ability to learn, motivation, social behaviour, and attitudes towards school are all formed as a consequence of a complex set of interrelated factors which begin at birth (and even before) and extend throughout each moment of waking life. By the time you have finished this book you should have a clear idea of what these factors are, and of how they influence child behaviour. You should also have a clear idea of the part you as teacher can play in the determination of this behaviour, and of how you can best help children to benefit from the learning opportunities that school has to offer.

The application of psychology to education has a long and honoured history, and stretches back to the first occasion when adults tried to influence the behaviour of the young. But it is only in comparatively recent years that the association between the two subjects has been given a firmly scientific basis. By this I mean that it is only during the last 60 years or so that psychology has developed the precision and methodology that allow it to make accurate generalizations about child behaviour, and to provide the teacher with the kind of information necessary if he or she is to make objective professional decisions and judgements. Without such information, the teacher can only fall back upon the sort of anecdotal evidence that we often hear when people are discussing children. We hear, for example, that children are supposed to be basically honest (or dishonest), that they like (or do not like) firm discipline, that they have (or have not) a sense of fair play, that they learn best in informal (or in formal) teaching environments, that they are influenced (or not influenced) by

what they see on television and so on. One school of thought has it that children's behaviour is the result of conditioning, another that they have the freedom to decide for themselves. We are told on the one hand that abilities such as intelligence are largely inherited, and on the other that they are largely the result of environmental influences. Small wonder that faced with such conflicting statements inexperienced teachers often feel confused, and decide in the end that they must make up their own minds on these and other important matters.

It would be wrong to suggest that modern psychology has final answers to all the questions that face us in education. Children (and teachers) are individuals, and often must be studied as individuals before detailed guidance on particular problems can be given. And, in any case, there are still large gaps in our knowledge that remain to be filled. Human behaviour is very complex and its measurement and assessment fraught with many difficulties. It is in fact this very complexity that gives the study of psychology much of its fascination. But psychology helps teachers recognize the factors that influence child behaviour and learning, and assists them in developing strategies to cope with the tasks that must be faced in the classroom. Furthermore, it helps the teacher to examine his or her own general professional behaviour, and to identify areas where this behaviour may itself have contributed towards particular problems that may have arisen. As is stressed repeatedly throughout the book, psychology shows us that no child's behaviour can be fully understood unless we study also the behaviour of others – teachers, parents, school friends – towards that child. Each individual stands at the centre of a complex matrix of interrelated influences, each of which must be taken into account if we are to comprehend the way in which the individual lives his or her life. In the case of the child this matrix is of particular importance. Still at an early formative stage in development, the child is very much dependent upon other people's behaviour. When the teacher, for example, speaks critically of the child's performance in a particular subject, the child may get the impression that this indicates he or she lacks ability in it, and that future performance may deteriorate even further. If we are to help that child improve his or her standards we must look therefore not only at the gaps in their knowledge but at the way in which the teacher, albeit unwittingly, has been undermining the child's confidence in his or her own potential.

Psychology also helps us answer some of the questions on the origins of individual differences. Are we born different, or do we simply become different as the result of experience? Put another way, are individual differences genetically or environmentally determined? By individual differences we mean not only intelligence but also such things as personality, creativity and motor skills. As we shall see, these answers are of critical

importance for the teacher since they indicate some of the limits to the influence which education can have upon our lives. If individual differences are largely inherited then there is little that education can do beyond developing what is already there. If, on the other hand, these differences are mainly the result of environment, then education has an enormous potential to redress and alter the consequences of early disadvantage and to help all children achieve the same high standards.

The book deals with children from an early age through into adolescence and the end of compulsory schooling, but this does not mean that you should pick out only those sections that apply to the ages you plan to teach or are actually teaching. For a full understanding of older children the secondary school teacher needs to know something of the formative influences that have been at work during the early part of their lives, while the primary school teacher needs to know something of the problems that may lie ahead of children in their care in order to play a full part in helping them develop the skills and strategies necessary to cope with such problems. The book is designed for both serving teachers and students in training, and the emphasis throughout is upon the practicalities of the teacher's task. Thus theoretical areas of psychology that may be of interest in themselves but that have little real application for what the teacher actually does with children are avoided. A high premium is also placed upon clarity, so that the non-specialist should be able to read the book without experiencing undue difficulties in understanding any of the points raised. Finally, the book can be read as a whole or dipped into, depending upon the needs of the reader. The important thing is that it should be of some use.

The plan of the book

The plan of the book is simple. In Part I we look at early influences upon the child such as parent-child relationships, family size, and social class. Part II then examines cognitive factors (i.e. mental factors to do with thinking, intelligence and learning) while Part III looks at affective factors (i.e. emotional factors to do with personality, attitudes and values). Part IV looks at social factors: that is, at the factors involved in the child's relationships with the teacher and with the classroom group, and at the teacher him or herself, at what is known about the qualities that make the successful teacher and at the ways in which we study interaction between the teacher and the class.

Each chapter outlines current knowledge in the areas concerned and discusses practical implications for the teacher. At the end of each chapter there are suggestions for further

Introduction to First Edition

reading, together with a list of questions and discussion points. These questions are not designed so much to test your factual knowledge as to draw attention to some of the most important issues discussed in the chapter and to start you thinking creatively about them.

David Fontana
University College Cardiff, 1981

Introduction to Second Edition

A number of extensive alterations to the material contained in the first edition have been made. Some of this material, in keeping with the policy for the *Psychology for Professional Groups* series of which this book is a part, was by authors other than myself. These contributions do not appear in the new edition, as I have rewritten the topics covered by them with teacher education exclusively in mind. The convention in the first edition of dividing the theoretical content of each chapter from the practical content has also been changed in the new edition with the result that each chapter now links theory and practice closely together throughout.

Opportunity has also been taken in the new edition to amalgamate the two chapters on personality, since this further helps the linkage of theory and practice. Across a wide area of subjects new sections have also been added, for example on early attachment, ethnic groups, neglected children, the home-school conflict, language and the school, teacher language, approaches to personality, personality states, measuring the self, social status, social roles, social skills and teacher stress. In addition, each part of the book has been thoroughly revised and updated, in the light both of current developments within the field of educational psychology and the feedback to the first edition obtained from students, practitioners and book reviewers. It is the hope of the publishers, the series editors and myself that these extensive alterations will further strengthen the book's usefulness both to student and to serving teachers.

David Fontana
University College Cardiff, 1988