
An assessment tool on teacher attitudes

Looking Inside: Helping Teachers Assess Their Beliefs and Values

by Paula Jorde Bloom

Directors often lament how difficult it is to change teachers so that teaching practices are more developmentally appropriate and interactions with parents and other staff are more professional. The reason for the difficulty is that change efforts typically focus on increasing teachers' knowledge base. Clearly, knowledge is important; the workshops, the college classes, the books and articles are essential to expanding teachers' repertoire of instructional strategies. But knowledge is only part of the equation when it comes to helping teachers grow in professional competence. Directors must also help teachers become reflective practitioners. And reflection begins with an examination of one's own belief system.

Teachers' attitudes and beliefs about children provide the foundation for their philosophy of teaching. Because beliefs are grounded in one's values, they have a strong impact on shaping behavior. Teachers' values also govern how they will react when confronted with the inevitable ethical dilemmas that occur from time to time.

The assessment tool at the end of this article was designed to help teachers reflect on their attitudes and beliefs about children, parents, and their role in the classroom. The information gleaned from this self-assessment will help directors better understand the undergirding values and beliefs that drive the teaching practices they observe. Without clarification of these values, it is

difficult to help teachers set goals for changing attitudes and behaviors.

This assessment can be used in a variety of ways. In the interviewing and hiring process, it can be used to help understand the belief system of prospective teachers. This information is essential if directors want to ensure that the beliefs and values of new staff are consonant with the shared beliefs and stated philosophy of the center.

The assessment can also be used as a springboard for discussion at a staff meeting. The director can distribute the assessment to teachers a few days before the meeting. Teachers can complete it at work or take it home where they may have fewer distractions. In either case, it is

important to tell teachers that there are no right or wrong answers.

The completed assessments can be collected prior to the meeting and the responses to each of the eight questions in Part I noted on a large piece of newsprint. It is not necessary to indicate which teacher made which comment. The eight sheets of newsprint can then be displayed on the walls in the room where the staff meeting will be held. The results of Part II can be summarized by simply noting the number of times a trait or characteristic was noted by teachers as being an important outcome of children's experience in the program.

If an open, nonjudgmental atmosphere exists during the staff meeting, a lively discussion should ensue about how each of the responses relates to the written philosophy and educational objectives of the center. A word of caution, though. When we discuss beliefs, we tap into teachers' core value systems. Tact and sensitivity to differing points of view is essential.

It is critical in such discussions that the director, as facilitator, avoid any hint of moralizing, criticizing, or judging the comments made by

teachers. If teachers feel threatened, they will either shut down and refuse to share their inner feelings about these important issues or they will get defensive and assume a confrontational posture. Both are counterproductive to the goal of the group exercise.

Through an active, reflective listening process, the director can assist teachers in identifying and articulating the beliefs and values that undergird their teaching philosophy. The goal is to help teachers reflect on the source of their beliefs and begin to discuss how important parents, religion, early school experiences, and educational training are in shaping one's values. When conducted in a nonthreatening way, such group discussions can help teachers gain greater insight into how their beliefs guide what they do in the classroom every day.

Subsequent staff meetings might tackle thornier issues related to teachers' values and beliefs about the curriculum, instruction, and the teacher's role in promoting children's learning. For example, teachers can be asked to share their beliefs regarding the extent to which they believe child care experiences impact children's overall development and learning. Recent research in this area has found that many early childhood teachers in this country embrace the belief that children's learning is largely determined by influences outside the center, in the genes and social background of the children. This belief is in sharp contrast to teacher beliefs in countries like Japan where teachers at all levels of the educational system believe that achievement is a product more of effort than inherent talent. Teachers in Japan tend to believe their efforts in promoting student learning can make a difference.

Below are several statements that can serve as discussion starters about different values and beliefs that undergird educational practice. Teachers can brainstorm to generate additional statements to add to this list.

- Practice makes perfect.
- Telling is teaching.
- Parents don't value teachers' knowledge and expertise.
- Boys are naturally better at math than girls.
- Competition is necessary to motivate learning.
- The teacher is an authority that should not be questioned.
- Responding too quickly to crying children will spoil them.

*Paula Jorde Bloom is associate professor of early childhood education at National-Louis University in Evanston, Illinois. Dr. Bloom is the author of several books, including **Avoiding Burnout** (New Horizons), **A Great Place to Work** (NAEYC), and **Living and Learning with Children** (New Horizons).*

Values Clarification*

Values are enduring beliefs — ideas that we cherish and regard highly. Values influence the decisions we make and the course of action we follow. Some values we prize more deeply than others; they become standards by which we live. The purpose of this assessment is to help you assess the values and beliefs that guide your teaching attitudes and behaviors.

PART I. Complete the following sentences.

1. I think children are generally _____
2. When children are unhappy, it's usually because _____
3. I get angry when children _____
4. The most important thing a teacher can do is _____
5. Children should not _____
6. All children are _____
7. I wish parents would _____
8. When parents _____ I feel _____

PART II. Circle the five traits and characteristics you would like children to be as a result of their pre-school experience with you.

- | | | |
|--------------|---------------------|-------------|
| adventurous | appreciate beauty | determined |
| affectionate | inquisitive | energetic |
| polite | respectful | friendly |
| altruistic | self-starter | obedient |
| caring | sense of humor | spontaneous |
| honest | industrious | persistent |
| assertive | creative | proud |
| confident | independent thinker | risk-taker |
| cheerful | desire to excel | open-minded |

* From: P. J. Bloom, M. Sheerer, and J. Britz (1991). *Blueprint for Action: Achieving Center-Based Change Through Staff Development*. Published by New Horizons, PO Box 863, Lake Forest, Illinois 60045. Reprinted with permission.