

DO TEACHERS TALK TOO MUCH?

Do teachers talk too much? Much too much. From the time we enter the school in the morning till we leave it at night, we hardly stop talking.

Some of the time we hand out information. Perhaps we read something from a text. Or we tell students something we think they ought to know. Other times we demonstrate, or explain, or criticize, or correct: This is how you do this experiment. This is how you are to write your book report. This is why you got that problem wrong.

Sometimes we run what we like to call discussions. Even then, we usually talk as much as all the students put together. Most discussions are pretty phony, anyway. Teachers begin a discussion with "points" in mind that they want the students to say. The students know this, so they fish for clues to find out what is wanted. They say, "I don't

get it." "I don't quite know what you mean by..." The teacher's questions get more and more pointed, until they point straight to the answer. When the teacher finally gets the answer he was after, he talks some more, to make sure all the students understand it is the "right" answer, and why it is.

Once I was teaching a fifth-grade math class and was very much pleased with myself because, instead of "telling" a youngster, I was "making her think" by asking questions. But she didn't answer. I followed each question with another that was easier and more pointed. Still no answer. I looked hard at my silent student and discovered she didn't even look puzzled. Just patient. Then it dawned on me: She was just waiting for that really pointed question — the one that would give her the right answer.

When a child gets answers by such means, it does dou-

ble harm: He doesn't learn, and he comes to believe that a combination to bluffing, guessing, mind reading, snatching at clues, and getting answers from other people is what school is all about.

Much of teacher's talk, maybe most of it, is just classroom management — keeping the kids in line. Somewhere we got the crazy notion that a class would learn most efficiently if everyone was learning the same thing at the same time. As if a class were a factory. So we have these flocks of children that we are trying to lead or drive down a chosen road. They don't all want to go down that road; maybe none of them do. They have other things they would rather do or think about. So we continually have to round them up and move them along, like a dog herding sheep. Only, our voice is the dog.

"Now, children, take out paper and pencil, and turn to page 34. We're going to work on — Tommy, where is your pencil? What? Well, why don't you? Come up

here and I'll give you another. . . . Mary, stop whispering to Helen. Is your book open to the proper page?"

And so on. We talk to get children ready to do what they are supposed to do, and then we talk to make sure they are doing it. We talk to keep everyone's attention focused on the front of the room.

Not long ago I saw an expert teacher, who had good rapport with his class, using a slide-film projector to do an arithmetic lesson. I began to wonder how many of the words he was speaking had to do with the actual work and how many had to do with sheep-dogging — keeping the class together. It was clear after a while that there was much more sheep-dogging than work — two or three times as much. This is not unusual.

One result of too much teacher talk is that children who, when they were little, were turned on full all the time, learn to turn themselves off or down. They listen with only a small part of their being, like any adult listening to boring talk. If

this goes on long enough, they forget how to turn themselves up, to listen with all their attention. They lose the knack of it and the taste for it. It is a great loss.

Of course, teachers know that children turn them off, and they have their little tricks to try and keep the children tuned in. But the children learn the little tricks that various teachers use, and low-powered listening becomes a substitute for high-powered attention.

But more important is that fact that while teachers talk all they want, the children get hardly any chance to talk at all. In most schools, the rule is still that children may speak only when called on. Many schools prohibit talking between classes, more than a few prohibit talking at lunch, and I have even heard of some where children were not allowed to talk during recess.

When we treat children this way, we make them bad learners. For real learning takes place only when the learner plays a dual role, when he is both learner and teacher, doer and critic, listener and speaker. The

student - who tries only to remember what is in his will not even succeed in doing that. The skillful learner talks to, even argues with, the book. He asks himself questions and checks his understanding as he goes along. Your poor student never knows what parts of a lesson he understands and what he does not. He leaves it to the teacher to find out.

Little children learning to walk, talk, and do a hundred other things are good at judging their own performances. Too often, is school and nonstop talking teachers that turn them into inert and passive learners — targets for verbal missiles that injure initiative.

Moreover, when a child gets little or no chance to talk, he does not get better at talking. Most of the fifth-graders I have known were no more articulate than many five-year-olds of comparable background; many of them were less so. This affects all their work in English. The child who is not used to putting his thoughts into words will not be able to put them into writing. He

will say that he can't think of anything to write about. When he does write, he will find it hard to tell whether his writing is good or not. For the test of good writing, after all, is not whether it conforms to rules of grammar — some of the worst writing around does that — but whether it sounds good. The only way a child can become skillful in the use of language is through trying to say, in speech or writing, things he wants to say, to people he trusts and wants to reach.

But there is a still more important reason for having teachers talk less and letting children talk more. A child comes to school full of thoughts, ideas, curiosity, wonder. But he soon finds out that nobody is interested in what he knows, what he is curious about, what he cares about. School is not a place for him to ask his questions, share his concerns, satisfy his curiosity. Before long he comes to doubt the worth of his own thoughts. He begins to feel, like his teachers, that the things that worry or please him or what

he needs to find out about are unimportant, a waste of time.

He does not develop a sense of his own identity and worth. He does not think of himself as a unique and valuable person, with ideas to express and share, with interests and skills he would find joy in pursuing and developing. He comes instead to feel that he can find satisfaction in life only by pleasing the authorities or the crowd. He loses his taste for independence and freedom, and is ready to follow anyone, or any group, that will make him feel like a somebody instead of a nobody.

Is this what we want? Haven't we learned by now how much harm such people can do?

Are we ready to start doing less talking and more listening, to treat children so that they will grow up feeling, not like slaves and puppets, but like free and valuable men? — *John Holt, in The PTA Magazine and Education Digest, December, 1967.*