Helping Teachers Understand Adult Temperament Interactions in the Workplace

By Elizabeth M. Wadlington

Teacher 1: "I just don't understand my co-worker! We're the only third grade teachers at our school and I'd like to work together. But every time I suggest something new, she won't even try it. She always says my ideas won't work. And now that I've asked our school librarian to help us liven up our reading program with motivating literature, she seems distant. I think she's avoiding me."

Teacher 2: "I wish the new teacher would just leave things alone. Why fix something that's not broken? I like the routines I've established and so do my kids. She's so busy running around trying every new idea that it makes me tired just to watch her. It's not that I don't want to do the best for my children, but I like to think about changes a long time before I make them. And then I like to take my time. Maybe if I avoid her, she'll let me do things my way."

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This scenario is one that baffles even the best professional educators. Although many teacher education programs train individuals to deal with children of different temperaments, most ignore temperament's effects on the working relationships of adults in a school setting. However, sometimes equally effective teachers find that it is not easy to work together due to differences in temperament.

In the above contrasting example, it is possible

that the first teacher is outgoing, active, and very adaptable to new situations. On the other hand, the second teacher may be more introspective and have a greater need for routines and careful planning. These traits do not make either person a poor teacher nor do they mean that these teachers can not learn to work together in a productive manner. However, both will need to make a conscientious effort to accept each other and learn to compromise to reach mutual goals.

A number of theorists (Barrett, 1991; Buss, Gingles, & Price, 1993; Chess & Thomas, 1986; Dorow, 1989; Feeney, Christensen, & Moravick, 1996; Jung, 1923; Keirsey and Bates, 1978; Klein, 1991; Meyers, 1962; Osborne, 1985; Thomas & Chess, 1977) have studied temperaments and their interactions. The work of Jayne Burks and Melvin Rubenstein (1979), based on the work of Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess (1977), is especially useful for analyzing adult temperaments in educational settings. Burks and Rubenstein describe temperament as a combination of basic inherent characteristics that may be used to explain why individuals behave as they do. These researchers modified nine dimensions of temperament of children according to Thomas and Chess to fit adults. Adult dimensions of temperament may be thought of as on a continuum and are as follows:

(a) Activity level—level of physical and mental activity;
(b) Rhythmicity—preference for routine;
(c) Approach or withdrawal—positive or negative responses to new experiences;
(d) Adaptability—ease of modifications due to new situations; ability to change;
(e) Intensity—energy level of a response (positive or negative);
(f) Threshold of responsiveness—sensitivity to changes in environment, including social environment;
(g) Quality of mood—global enjoyment as opposed to selective enjoyment of life;
(h) Distractibility—readiness to leave an activity;
(i) Persistence—length of time devoted to an activity.

Burks and Rubenstein recognize that temperament is only one determinant of adult behavior since other factors (*e.g.*, motivations, abilities) are also involved. However, understanding one's own temperament and those of others can be extremely useful in establishing productive relationships.

Using the nine dimensions as a starting point, I have developed a series of informal, non-threatening activities that may be utilized in college classes or inservice workshops to assist teachers and other school personnel in recognizing adult temperaments and interacting with them successfully. The activities will be described as they might occur in a graduate university course; however, they may be adapted to fit the needs of different institutions and situations. It is best if the activities are broken up into two different sessions since reflective application between experiences is helpful. If participants are not familiar with the role temperament plays in adult/child interactions, these activities may be modified to include an emphasis on this as well. (See Thomas & Chess, 1977, for further information on children's temperaments.)

Activities

Activity #1

Initially, participants assess their own temperaments. First, they are given the nine dimensions of temperament along with simple explanations and examples. It is emphasized that no particular temperament style is better than another and no one in the class will be making value judgments during any of the activities.

Then they are asked to reflect upon their own temperaments using this information and write what they discover in their personal journals. Some participants very quickly analyze their own temperaments and are eager to share. Other participants take longer to reflect and ask for additional examples to explain the dimensions. Once all participants have finished writing, they share their reflections in small groups of three or four. They always appear glad to find classmates with temperaments similar to their own. They sometimes seem astounded that others can be so different. After small group discussion, participants are given time for further reflection and allowed to change their analyses if needed. One teacher's reflection is summarized as follows:

> I had never thought about why I behave as I do, and I'm still not sure. I have a high activity level, but I'm easily distracted and not very persistent. I guess this helps to explain why I have so many things going on at once. I'm also very optimistic and feel like everything will always work out. I'm not very attune to changes in my environment, especially my social environment, which gets me in trouble sometimes.

Activity #2

Next, participants are asked to think about a time when they immediately hit it off with a colleague (*e.g.*, teacher, principal, support person) and another time when they had a hard time getting along with one. They are asked to describe these experiences and try to explain them in terms of temperament in their journals. Then they go back to their small groups to share these reflections. Often talking to others in their groups gives them valuable insights into the positive and negative experiences. Many times, points of view are changed when someone in the group has a temperament similar to that of a co-worker considered difficult. Following is an example of a change of viewpoint:

> I had a hard time getting along with my assistant teacher year before last. I like a slow pace, and I'm pretty easy going. I'm easily distracted when too many things are going on at once. After reflecting today, I also realize that I am very selective about the things I really like and enjoy. On the other hand, my assistant teacher was a "Pollyanna." Her constant cheerfulness even when things weren't going right really got on my nerves. I thought she was being insincere. And she was always interrupting me when I was working with a student or trying to count lunch money.

> She really seemed nice deep-down so I didn't understand why she kept frustrating me. Now after talking to a group member with a similar temperament, I understand my assistant better. She didn't realize her interruptions bothered me because she was so focused. And her constant optimism wasn't an act. She was just positive about everything. Knowing this would have made compromise easier.

At this point, group members are asked to meet with a classmate with a temperament similar to the one of the other person described in their negative experiences. Each partnership brainstorms to come up with ways to effectively resolve each negative situation. Most partnerships gain not only a better understanding of temperament but of negotiating skills as well.

Activity #3

Sometimes temperament is a factor in interactions between teachers, parents, and children. In order to gain insights into the complexities of parent-child relationships, participants are asked to evaluate the role temperament plays in their relationships with their own children. If participants do not have children, they are asked to consider other children they know. Through this evaluation, participants become cognizant of three points: (a) parents may be delighted and interactions may be easier when children display temperaments similar to their parents; (b) on the other hand, parents may be dismayed and interactions may be trying when their children's temperaments are similar to their own; and (c) self-esteem of parents may be closely tied to their perceptions of the behavior and performance of their children.

Keeping the above exercise in mind, participants are asked to prepare to role-play conferences with parents with temperaments very different from their own. First, participants write descriptions of parents with opposite temperaments for each other. Then real-life topics (*e.g.*, Shannon cries often at school; Kim is easily distracted and bounces from one activity to another) are provided. Next, participants are partnered with each other and instructed that one should prepare to play the teacher's role and the other should prepare to be the parent. Adequate time for preparation is important since participants must not only try to empathize with their roles but with the roles of their partners as well.

Conference simulations are held as the rest of the class observes. After each simulation, the class discusses the interaction of temperaments in the success or failure of each situation. All participants record their reflections regarding this activity in their journals. Following is an example of a journal excerpt:

> I once was having a problem with a child who was very persistent and hard to distract from an activity until it was finished. So why was this a problem? The child was a perfectionist and hardly ever finished anything. I didn't understand what was going on as I'm not this way at all. His dad came in to talk to me and volunteered that he was much like his son—staying up to all hours to try to get some work or home project just right. I gave the father specific examples of times when this behavior on his son's part was a problem at school. We both decided to do some

appropriate modeling—stopping a project when it was good enough and verbalizing this to the child. Over time, the child became more willing to leave a good-enough project sooner.

Activity #4

As a culminating activity, participants are asked to think about the overall goodness of fit of their temperaments with the temperaments of others at their workplaces. They reflect upon their own strengths/weaknesses and write ways in which they might go about enhancing or subduing certain aspects of their temperaments in order to be better educators. During this final activity, it is stressed that individuals with diverse and even contrary temperaments can be effective when working with children. Following is such a reflection:

> I am a principal of a middle school. I am well-organized, low-keyed, and prefer stability and planning. Some of my classroom teachers are more adaptable, flexible, and intense in their responses. At first I felt threatened by this, but we've come to understand each others' styles and complement each other. Now I find that putting people with different temperaments on the same committee makes for a balanced approach to solving problems.

Follow-Up

After these activities, participants have first-hand knowledge of the effects of temperament on interactions among adults in school settings. As follow-up, they are asked to continue to reflect upon this as they interact with co-workers and parents in real life. They record these reflections in their journals on a regular basis in order to analyze and assess their experiences. Many times their reflections spill over to interpersonal relationships at home and in other non-educational settings.

Learning Tools

The author has observed that these activities are valuable for learning about one's own temperament, the temperaments of others, and interactions affected by temperament. Journals and role-plays are two main tools used to facilitate learning.

Participants often comment that they find journaling to be an effective way to explore temperament and exchange views with others in a non- threatening manner. For journaling to work, the instructor must first establish a risk-free environment that encourages participants to perceive opposing viewpoints as food for thought and catalysts for change. Journals should not be graded or corrected for language mechanics since the emphasis is on meaning. Participants should be able to write honestly and freely without worrying about punctuation, spelling, etc.

Value-free brainstorming is often helpful to get ideas flowing before writing in journals. Reading journal entries aloud to partners or in small groups first, and, later, sharing ideas in the larger group aids participants in refining and revising their viewpoints in a natural, gradual manner. Value negotiation can be observed taking

place as participants actively listen and respond to each other. These same journals and similar guidelines may be used for reflection on other topics throughout the semester.

Role-playing is an enjoyable and useful activity for participants. They report that it allows them to walk in the shoes of others with different temperaments. They often gain understandings into the thoughts, emotions, and problems of individuals very different from themselves. Before role-playing parent-teacher interactions, it is helpful to have participants who are parents describe typical interactions with their children and their teachers. It can also be beneficial to ask participants to close their eyes and imagine themselves as assigned players in common problem situations (*e.g.*, the parent who is angry with the teacher over a messy activity, the teacher who has stayed up all night preparing the messy activity). Then participants may brainstorm or write ideas randomly in their journals before actually beginning the role-play. This sets the mood and helps even the most timid "actors" prepare for their parts. It is extremely important that all participants take turns playing various parts and actively observing/reacting to the role-plays of others. This encourages dynamic involvement by all.

Conclusion

An understanding of temperament and its effects on oneself and others should be an important part of any teacher education program. In undergraduate programs, it is recommended that temperament and similar issues be covered in early educational psychology or foundation courses. This allows students to apply what they have learned about temperament in later clinical or field-based courses. In graduate school, it is also recommended that temperament be studied early in an advanced degree program. Graduate students who are practicing classroom teachers can apply what they learn immediately in their own teaching situations. Getting along with colleagues (at the university and in the workplace) frees undergraduate and graduate students to concentrate on other important issues (*e.g.*, one's philosophy of teaching, theories and beliefs, appropriate practices, individualization, professionalism). Guest speakers from counseling centers or psychology departments are often able to assist professors in planning temperament activities, if needed.

An awareness of temperament does not guarantee that all adult school relationships will be smooth and trouble-free. It does not ensure that co-workers will become good friends and confidants. However, as individuals reflect upon temperament, they come to understand themselves and others better. As a result, they become more tolerant and willing to compromise. This in itself becomes a positive role model for the children and families they strive to reach.

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