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The Teacher in Preparation and the Teacher in Action

by

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There is a statement in the Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec (Canada) made a little more than a decade ago which would still be relevant today, whether in Canada or in Singapore. It runs as follows:

“Teachers are the keystone of any system and the only hope for the accomplishment of educational reforms. Whatever the programs of study may be, whatever standards are established, whatever experiments are tried, the solution depends ultimately on the teaching staff.”

The sentiments expressed lays emphasis on the teacher variable as the most important, single variable in the educational enterprise. True, there are teaching machines, self-teaching packages and all the other products of modern technology which are purported to be able to perform many of the tasks of the teacher. But while the best of these do justify some of the claims made, they are not self-generating, they are products of the human mind, the genius of the creative teacher, slow and difficult to come by and, therefore, still prohibitively expensive. Thus despite all the apparent threat these materials posed as likely substitutes for live teachers when they first came on to the teaching scene, educational technology has in no way taken over in the field of teaching. Also the type of interaction which occurs between a single machine and the human learner can hardly equal the quality of the most desirable forms of interaction between human and human which allow the learner free rein to probe and search for values and alternatives. At most, machines may intervene for short periods of instruction; the stage of “total dependence” on the machine will never come. The human teacher will continue to survive in the modern world. Suffering slight and contumely most of the time, the teacher is yet no negligible digit in a system. He it is who has to make good the promises implicit in the mass delivery of education.

So long as teachers are needed, so long will the preparation of teachers for their job remain an important activity. Teacher educators, however, hold the curious position of having scant option to specify the pre-requisites for training. These are subject to constant change, depending on the gravity of the demand for teachers. Also, those who choose teaching as a career in more recent times are more likely those who

select it as last option from among the range of occupational choices readily available in a rapidly industrialising or industrialised society. There are also off-putting aspects of the teacher's status and functions which tend to deter individuals from committing themselves to teaching. The status of the teacher is, on occasion, ambiguous. According to Taylor, "he is expected to act as an exemplar of moral virtue and at the sometime he has to learn to renounce any claim to the higher rewards and status to which his education might otherwise entitle him... he acts as guardian of the elite membership, but without the right of personal entry to the elite." His work has become increasingly difficult as he is required to cope with larger and larger groups of pupils and to give meaning and significance to the education of individuals, whose ability and desire to learn cover a wide spectrum of heterogeneity. Only the rare few who choose teaching as a career are motivated by a spontaneous desire to teach.

Given this situation, the profile of the trainee would be difficult to specify in terms of the ideal. Better it is, perhaps, to consider what might be minimal expectations and plan the content of training to make the best of a difficult job.

Before looking at expectations, it would help to consider the aspects of the teaching task for which a teacher may be justifiably held accountable. These are as follows:

1. Teachers should be held responsible for being informed in subject matter. This seems self-evident and yet, with regard to those who seek training in Singapore in recent years, there is a growing irrelevance between the academic preparation of the teacher and the needs of schools. This, coupled with narrow specialisation, are two factors which render teachers inadequate for the teaching of two school subjects effectively. For example, university graduates in sociology, philosophy, political science, etc... are thin on content when made to teach language or geography. The teacher prepared in Chemistry is unable to teach physical science because of narrow specialisation without physics.
2. Teachers may be held accountable for the purpose they seek to carry out. The best teachers are purposive ones who not only understand the techniques and skills of teaching, but also possess a clear vision of what the objectives might be. In this connection it may be pertinent to stress the importance of communicating the rationale of change to teachers. The better they perceive the purpose, the better they will teach.
3. Teachers are also the masters of their own methods. Methods in themselves are neither good nor bad, but the teacher must know why he applies a particular method, the how and the when. Of late,

we have read quite a lot in the local press about the controversy between those who advocate traditional methods, laced together with strict discipline, and others, who prescribe a freer atmosphere and more modern methods, so-called, to encourage discovery and creativity. The proponents of one or the other method are elated when research results seem to prove the point. What does not surface is that, in the research methodology, the teacher variable too often escapes control or evaluation. Methods per se can prove anything, the bad as well as the good.

There is no single good method. The methods must be highly personal to the teacher. According to Combs, "the essence of good professional work calls for thinking practitioners able to confront problems and find effective solutions. Often these solutions may be highly unique and incapable of measurement by standard techniques." It would be foolhardy therefore to prescribe methods for teachers. Far better it is that a teacher believes in what he does. By his fruits, we can justify both him and his method.

4. Teachers can also be held responsible for their understanding of human behaviour. Given the daily contact with pupils, they should try to develop those perceptions and sensitivity to pupil behaviour which will enable them to meet the needs of each child in the best possible way. They should check their own observations against information which is available from the proper source, for example, books carrying data from research or the writings of those with experience in the study of behaviour. Too many children become the objects of teachers' self-fulfilling prophecies, based on unsubstantiated beliefs. This should be avoided.
5. Lastly, if teachers have knowledge, but no concern, they would still be short of the proper professional standard of conduct. Teachers can certainly be held accountable for concern. On the teacher's part, it should always be a satisfying experience to be able to say, 'I have done my best'.

To equip teachers for such tasks, therefore, the training course has these objectives:

1. To enable students to continue academically beyond the school or college level so that they may not only be better informed, but be better able to respond to an ever-present intellectual challenge, posed by the rapid explosion of knowledge, students are made to study in-depth at least two academic disciplines in order to help them understand the structure and concepts of these disciplines,

this ideal has not been consistently attainable and remedial courses have had to be offered to provide for lack of knowledge.

2. To help students to relate knowledge to the lives of children,
3. To enable them to select and achieve mastery of certain teaching strategies which represent different viewpoints of learning.
4. To help them develop interest in and concern for their pupils through case studies based in school sample.
5. To help trainees to become more purposive at their work. They are required to look critically at curriculum materials, at teaching and learning problems, and at the objectives of each day's work.

The problem of teacher preparation is essentially one of bringing theory closer to practice. Bringing this about is a task which has begun in the teacher training institution, but has to be continued in the schools by the individual teachers themselves.

This leads me to the need to provide career-long in-service education for teachers. Knowledge, whether in an academic field or on professional matters, becomes quickly redundant in our times. Also, new insights are often acquired through coming into contact with other minds through books or through the sharing of experiences. Training can never come to an end, if the teacher is not to become an anachronism in a rapidly changing world.

The Institute envisages in-service courses as of three types:

1. The remedial type to amend specific shortcomings in academic preparation, arising either out of inadequate experience, or the need to meet new demands of the curriculum
2. The upgrading-type, for those who wish to improve their qualifications
3. The enrichment type, for teachers who wish to acquire new knowledge to improve old insights and ensure that practice is continuously being informed by theory.

At the beginning of this discussion, I implied that the teacher's position is unassailable from the standpoint of need. This does not mean that the conventional line for teaching will necessarily remain. The teacher must be prepared to be readily adaptable to change. According to the trends,

teachers will be increasingly involved in team work in teaching and in the development of resources for teaching. He will be drawn more and more into curriculum development. He will need to read more extensively, as the trend is towards inter-disciplinary studies; while specialist in interest, he must be versatile in learning. As educational technology becomes more sophisticated, he should be able to select and use systematically those aids or devices which will enrich his teaching and economise best on his time and energy. The community will begin again to hold teacher important and look to the teacher for guidance on the problems of children.

These are heavy demands; the teacher will become adequate only by practice. The earlier the practice begins in these aspects of professional task, the surer the development towards self-fulfilment and teaching success.