

Tools for Learning

READING FOR TEACHERS

LOU LABRANT

"I CAN ALMOST TELL," said a supervisor of elementary schools recently, "what most of my teachers are going to think and do about reading, by looking up their records to see when they last went to summer school. Something must be done to keep them up to date without dependence on what some university professor is going to do to them."

While most of us trust that such conditions are exceptions, it is doubtless true that a great many teachers are more dependent upon summer work or an occasional quarter off for advanced study than we would hope. The intent of our schools is to make, among other things, literate citizens, who will be able and inclined to keep themselves informed about the state of the nation and alert to developments in their own vocations and the world at large through reading.

It seems fair, therefore, to expect that the teacher himself will use reading as one means, and perhaps the chief means, for learning about his own field, its problems, the findings of research bearing on those problems, the experiments being currently tried out, and the better procedures developed. In addition teachers will, of course, be under obligation to be better informed citizens than the average person, since they have accepted a role of leadership recognized in the very name of teacher.

Recognizing the importance of the teacher's keeping abreast of the times, boards of education the country over have encouraged

summer study. Often they offer a bonus or increase of permanent salary or advancement as motivation. The added financial aids are in reality more than motivation: they are the means; for too often salaries are so low as to make summer study difficult for the teacher who does not happen to live near a good school. Attending summer school is, however, but one step.

Getting the Reading Habit

Early in the term, any live teacher of teachers becomes aware of a fairly sharp division in his classes. There are the teachers who have read the journals, who know the names of the leaders, who refer to some new books and findings, who ask about interpretations, who are—in short—ready for advanced study. These are, it is sad to say, in the minority in most areas. There is the other group which eagerly reads the new books, becomes excited with pleasure or resentment at new procedures, and finishes the course with the statement that it has been an inspiration and a revelation.

There is, of course, a small sprinkling of teachers who frantically copy down statements from books and instructor, trying to take back some recipe for better teaching, but who are almost oblivious to the great movements in education which flow from changes in national and international affairs. Fortunately the latter group, though real and dangerous, is not large.

The foregoing statements lead to the thesis of this little paper: that teachers should be reading regularly and should find it relatively easy to know what is being done in their own fields. The difficulty, not realized by those who do not teach young children and adolescents daily, is that frequently the teacher is literally too tired at 4 o'clock to go to a library or bookstore and that by the time he is rested stores are closed and the library far away.

Lou LaBrant of New York University introduces "Tools for Learning" with a thorough analysis of reading for teachers. Miss LaBrant discusses the importance to teachers of keeping posted on matters both professional and general and makes suggestions about the kinds of books a good teacher's library should contain. She emphasizes the wisdom of making the selections in such a library teacher-chosen rather than superintendent-imposed.

Many persons talk at length about the short hours of the teacher and his opportunity for long evenings of reading. And yet these same persons will find themselves exhausted after a half day of responsibility for even four or five alert boys and girls. There is probably no tonic like the feeling at 4 o'clock that the day has been worthwhile, that young minds have been stimulated. Nevertheless the very stimulation of a live class takes nervous energy, and the close of the school day is not a time for the teacher to focus on searching for reading matter of a serious nature. Two hours later he may welcome the serious, forward-looking book.

So that reading materials will be easily accessible, the school should have within its walls a decent professional library for teachers. This need not be large, but it should be chosen with care. Too frequently such a library is chosen by the supervisor who wants to improve his staff or the superintendent who donates his own (unread) yearbooks and adds others which seem good from his over-all standpoint. Surely the superintendent and the principals and supervisors should contribute ideas; but half the value is lost if the teachers themselves do not participate in the selection of new reading materials for the library.

What Shall We Put on the Shelves?

If a little time is spent on this selection, much more reading will occur. Several types which could well be included in such a school library are: (1) books on world problems of immediate moment, to be passed around, read, used hard, discussed, and probably worn out; (2) books discussing the problems of education in terms of the national scene (such as *Youth Tell Their Story*, *Youth and the Future*), books dealing with proposed general education, books on national problems of education, international responsibilities, and social movements which involve education (such as the use of English as a world language, student exchange); (3) accounts of outstanding experiment and research, suited for discussion (such as the accounts of the Eight-Year Study, or of experimental schools); and (4) books dealing with the curriculum, specific or general.

Far too often we talk about the interdependence of the various areas, but are un-

believably ignorant about what is going on in other departments. Social studies teachers would enjoy reading about some of the experiments in language arts, language teachers would profit from some of the newer procedures in mathematics and science, and the whole school might gain from the analysis of the problem of science teaching as it is met by that department. A group of English teachers found their problem of the nature of language clarified by illustrations from the teaching in home economics.

Certainly recent studies and programs in physical education are of interest to all teachers. It is strange that teachers of physical education should be thought of as more concerned with growth studies than any others, although all teachers deal with youngsters who are passing through glandular and structural changes which affect their speech, writing, social attitudes, muscular control, interest span, and energy.

No pattern can be laid down for general acceptance, but perhaps an illustration of what might be done will be helpful. A school with a hundred teachers and the usual range of departments might do something like the following. The principal could announce the amount of funds which the board thought fair to assign to the professional growth of teachers. If even so modest a sum as \$100 were available, thirty-five or forty books could be purchased. (A dollar a teacher is a very small amount for a board of education to invest in professional stimulation.)

Allowing ten readings to a book (with an average of three weeks to each book), the thirty-five books would total 350 readings, over three books per teacher. This may not seem a large gain, but some would read in addition bits brought in for discussion, a goodly number would read much faster than a book in three weeks, and certainly the mere statement of the average number of books read does not begin to reflect the total stimulation received. Some of the books could well be reviewed by competent members of the staff, thus spreading the information and stimulation gained.

Discovering and Using Books

Selection and purchase of the books by teachers would prove almost as valuable to these hundred teachers as the reading itself.

These processes necessitate the reading of reviews, comparison of books, examination of those rejected.

Books are not the only requisite of a professional library. Current articles are frequently more significant than the summaries which appear in books. English teachers may subscribe for their own journal, mathematics teachers for theirs, and so forth. It would be wise for teachers to have on the faculty table the publications of other departments and to use articles of general value and specific method as a basis for discussion.

There is little good in a professional library which remains on the shelves; and there is most likelihood of use when teachers assist in the selection and when there is some time for free discussion. Perhaps some of the routine matters of announcements so often brought into faculty meetings could be managed by mimeographing, and faculty meetings given over to exchange of findings and consideration of new ideas. On second thought it seems strange that most of our faculty meetings do not consist of just that.

Is it thinkable that alert persons, responsible for teaching the children of the greatest democracy the world has seen, would not be meeting regularly to discuss the great issues of civilization, the new knowledge in regard to child growth and development, the findings of science, and their own tremendously important role as teachers? Surely they must be doing just this, and surely superintendents and boards of education and supervisors must be doing everything they can—including the spending of funds for materials—to promote this thinking. Five dollars a teacher would seem a small sum to spend in order to stimulate growth of this kind—a growth which must not be left to chance, nor even to a possible summer school professor.

"Tools for Learning" in February will deal with teaching the skills and will be introduced by Mildred English of Georgia State College for Women, Milledgeville, Ga.

BOOK NOTE

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