

These Are Our Teachers

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We are asked to consider the quarter-century in which today's young teachers were born, the education they were offered, the school situations they enter, and their capabilities and potentialities. We are asked also to use as leaven the rich background of experience which they bring to the teaching situation. Clara Skiles Platt is well qualified, from her position as director of the undergraduate curriculum for childhood education at New York University, to review pre-service education as it exists today and suggest its potentialities for improved education for boys and girls.

THE YOUNG TEACHERS in the classrooms of America today were born, educated, and given their professional education within the most chaotic quarter-century in American history. They are products and members of a society which is in the throes of social-economic revolution and, therefore, find themselves struggling to make the most of life in a rapidly changing scene where new problems and new ways of life are constantly presenting themselves. With few exceptions these young teachers have been forced to take and share responsibilities far beyond their years and capacities. In addition to the perilous socio-economic problems, they have grown up through differing family circumstances and religious and ethnic backgrounds as well as in differing regional and community environments. As a group and as individuals they are unique. In their uniqueness these new teachers of America have much in common with and much which equips them to meet the needs of American children of the mid-twentieth century.

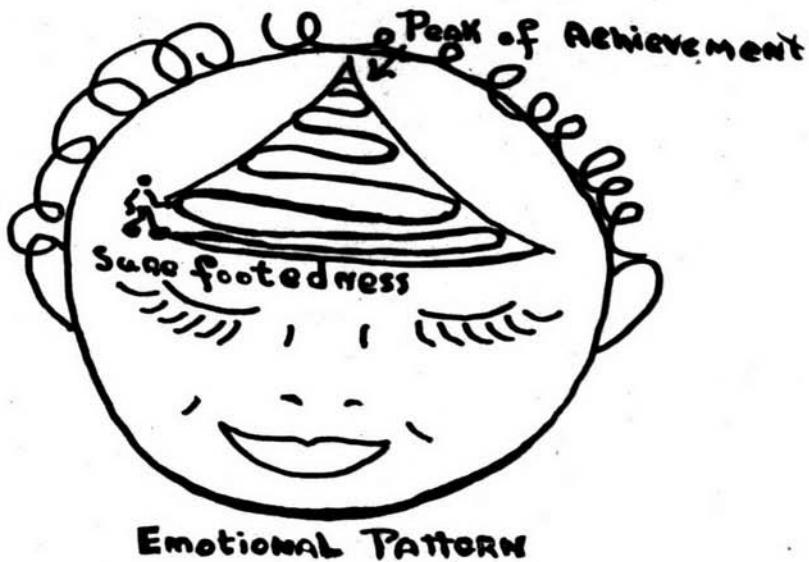
Learn Their Characteristics

From recent studies, such as those of the Commission on Teacher Education

of the American Council on Education, have come pertinent facts concerning the qualities and experiences of recent graduates and prospective teachers from various parts of the country.¹ In general terms these young people are described as being realistic, mature, and sincerely interested in the welfare of people. They are characterized as people with convictions and drives related to social goals. They recognize the major role of economics in all problems and all types of activities. In spite of the stresses and strains of their war and postwar experiences these teachers seem to have resiliency, readiness for the job at hand, and wholesome curiosity. They have integrity which shows in a variety of forms of expression and action. Its most common manifestation is in the quality of their relationships with pupils, co-workers, and parents—a quality marked by simple, friendly give-and-take in all living-working-together matters.

Most of these young teachers have developed a kind of an emotional

¹ (a) American Council on Education, *The History and Activities of the American Council on Education*, Washington, D. C., 1941. (b) American Council on Education, *Major Issues in Teacher Education*, Washington, D. C., 1939. (c) American Council on Education, *Teachers for Our Times*, Washington, D. C., 1944.



pattern which is described as "sure footedness." They have seen, heard, and felt keenly about personal, family, and other problems and have worked out ways of understanding them in relation to themselves and their constellation of family and friends. This maturity and understanding makes for a tone of positiveness which helps these teachers and the people with whom they work meet new problems. With few exceptions these young teachers have a sincere desire to use their resources and time for the good of people; but they also have strong personal and social needs in the areas of recognition, success, prestige, and security.

Consider Their Responsibilities

Throughout the past twenty-five years the variance between the experiences and needs of young people and the educational programs in too many American schools has created one of the most serious problems which teachers,

supervisors, administrators, and teacher education institutions face. The basic needs of children and young people have come to be as complex as the society of which they are a part, and there are some elementary schools in the country that for a number of years have been working at this problem by building their curriculum in terms of all the things that children living in our society do. These schools have accepted the role of the school as the most important of all educational agencies and, consequently, have made it responsible for organizing its purposes and content so that its curriculum includes all the things which children do.

The function of teachers in such schools is to know and understand the school-community so well that they can organize the school activities and curricular materials to make them indigenous and related to the children's lives. In addition, they have the responsibility of knowing and evaluating the

facts which have to do with the growth and welfare of the children. In all these teacher activities the necessary studies and sources can be gleaned from the life of the community—the homes, the streets, the market places, the play areas, and the recreation centers.

Their Preparation

The preparation for such teacher responsibility is coming to be preparation for what would seem to be the most fundamental form of social service. Some of the teacher education institutions of the country have taken the lead in revising their programs to meet this responsibility and are actually exemplifying the kind of teaching they want their graduates to use when they take their places in the public schools of America. Since the middle of the nineteen-thirties some national, state, regional, and local educational organizations have made intensive studies, provided leadership, and set up experimental programs which include "studies of problems of contemporary society—problems which effect the quality of living in each community and preparation in the solution of these problems."²

As a result, many of today's young teachers are graduates of institutions where good general and professional education were provided. They have had opportunities to study in an integrated fashion—that is, through the working out of problems in field work, discussion, reading, and lectures—a comprehensive body of information based on the common needs, problems, and heritage of all kinds of people. They

have also studied the role of education in society by working in a number of different types of school-communities where they gained first-hand knowledge of children—their needs, growth, and development. In both the general and professional areas of the curriculum many of the courses were directly related to human welfare.

"In the preparation of teachers for early and later childhood at the School of Education at New York University the junior field work was organized so that each student spent two half days each week for six to eight weeks in each of four schools during the year. Plans for each student involved, in addition to classroom observation and participation, a thorough study of the community—a study based on the children's backgrounds and starting with the children's records in school. It included (1) backgrounds of the people of the community—national, racial, social, and economic; (2) housing, markets, and transportation facilities; (3) organizations and facilities which offered recreation and opportunities for participation in music, dance, art, crafts, sports, and forums; (4) health facilities both public and private; (5) welfare organizations, their purposes, services, and means of support; (6) the school as a physical plant—the facilities it afforded for classwork, play, rest, health and medical service, and eating; (7) the general aim of the school program; (8) the aims and objectives of the teacher with whom the student worked and the program provided to meet these aims and objectives; (9) the teacher's understanding of children and her attitude toward them; (10) the number of children in the school and each class group; (11) the relationships between the teachers and the school administrators, the teachers and the parents, and the teachers, parents, and the social agencies in the community."³

² Clara S. Platt, *The Preparation of Elementary Teachers at New York University*. Dissertation at New York University, 1946.

³ *Ibid.*

Their Role in the Unified Program

In these teacher training institutions the dignity and worth of each student are recognized from the day of his admission to the end that he may as soon as possible become a potential teacher and an actual, contributing member of the institution. In recognition of the variety of student potentialities and needs, complete records of students' backgrounds and experiences are used as materials basic to the general curricular plan; and conscientious effort is made to emphasize the total experience and growth of all students. Toward this end the number of different courses is reduced to a minimum so as to organize major centers of learning in relation to the studies and needs of each group of freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior students.

It follows, then, that teacher-adviser relationships and work plans are unified in purpose. In some institutions the role of specialists in the various subject matter fields is that of consultants to the teacher-advisers and students. The class rooms, libraries, and laboratories come to be recognized as workshops, each supplementing the others. Just as science rooms and arts and crafts rooms are laboratories so are social studies and human development classrooms coming to be laboratories with their materials and activities set up to serve the broader curricular purposes.

Young teachers coming from teacher training institutions where laboratory methods and materials are used in practically all aspects of programs for professional education and greater emphasis is placed on experiences with children promise to provide leaven to the educational programs of our schools.

A report of some of the senior work and activities of the class of 1945 of majors in childhood education, the School of Education at New York University reads as follows:

"Some fairly definite lines of progress are indicated in the fourth year of the experimental program offered in the Elementary Education Department to undergraduates. We have attempted to develop competent, growing, creative persons who feel secure in their relationships and undertakings in the University and in the field; to open multiple avenues of work and exploration in and around Greater New York to all students; to discover and develop potentialities in the students and to give them positive direction in practical community work with groups of children and adults; to establish relationships and understandings in ever-widening areas; to create in every student a sense of belonging and of serving, and an understanding of the interdependence of people; to encourage the "reaches" and efforts of students who want to make themselves vital parts of community forces; to reveal the needs for knowing environments and their part in human development; and finally to study *thoroughly* the child, his nature and needs, in all stages of his development in the situation in which we find him.

"The teacher-advisers have tried to serve as coordinators between the University with its requirements and the communities with their needs as the students take double roles in shuttling from the academic-theoretical to the practical and vice versa. The graduating group have developed personal-professional qualities and made achievements which speak for themselves in the following facts:

1. Each student has taught from 8:30 AM to 3:00 PM five days per week from the opening of the various schools in September through May 15.
2. The average teaching hours were 785, the maximum 969, and the minimum 600 for the year.

3. Each has taught one term in the lower elementary school and one term in the upper elementary school.
4. The students in each school surveyed the community in which they worked—housing, recreation, economic status of families, business and industry, nationalities, and religions represented, and any other factors influencing the lives of the children and their parents.
5. Each student surveyed her class—ages, general abilities and interests, past records, case histories where available, previous school experiences, home backgrounds, and important comments made by the teacher which might serve as principles and point to problems.
6. Each student spent some time in observation, a great deal of time in participation, but the major part of her time in responsible teaching.
7. Every student took responsibility in *all classroom work* and activities, in music, art, and crafts, on the playground, at luncheon service, at rest periods, and assembly programs.
8. Every student planned and assisted in nearby and extended trips.
9. Every student attended faculty meetings (when open to students) and parent meetings and assisted in community holiday celebrations.
10. One half of the students served as substitutes when the regular teachers were absent, the time ranging from two days to two weeks.
11. One half of the students worked out musical and dramatic programs with the children and presented them to parent and school groups.
12. The descriptions most commonly used in the cooperating teachers' reports were 'genuine interest in children' 'unusual understanding and respect for individuals,' 'initiative and untiring efforts,' 'high degree of ability,' 'sincerity,' 'cooperating,' 'poise and self-confidence,' 'resourceful,' 'wholesome,' 'refreshing and valuable assistant.'

Recognize Their Potentialities

Supervisors and administrators having to deal with the large numbers of experienced teachers-in-service who attended authoritarian elementary and secondary schools, followed fixed curricula in liberal arts colleges or prescribed courses undemocratically conducted in teachers colleges, and studied subject matter isolated from their personal problems and the community problems, as well as with young teachers who have also had various proportions of this type of schooling, need the leaven which may come from recent educational programs and practices. Many of the young teachers have broad educational backgrounds, understanding of the individuals to be taught, appreciation of and belief in the inter-relations between education and democratic society, and a sense of social responsibility to give leadership to all groups of children and youth in the communities which they serve. To the end that improvement may be carried on in the way children work, play, rest, eat, and live together successfully, young teachers should be given opportunities to experiment with new ideas, activities, and materials, and to omit unrelated, traditional subject matter.

With all of the studies, recommendations, records, and experiences relating to education and to teachers, the good supervisor must realize that, just as good teachers come to see each child with his own particular readiness for experience, his own techniques for dealing with his world, his own way of regarding himself and his work, so also must she come to see each new teacher with her unique personal and professional qualities and potentialities.

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