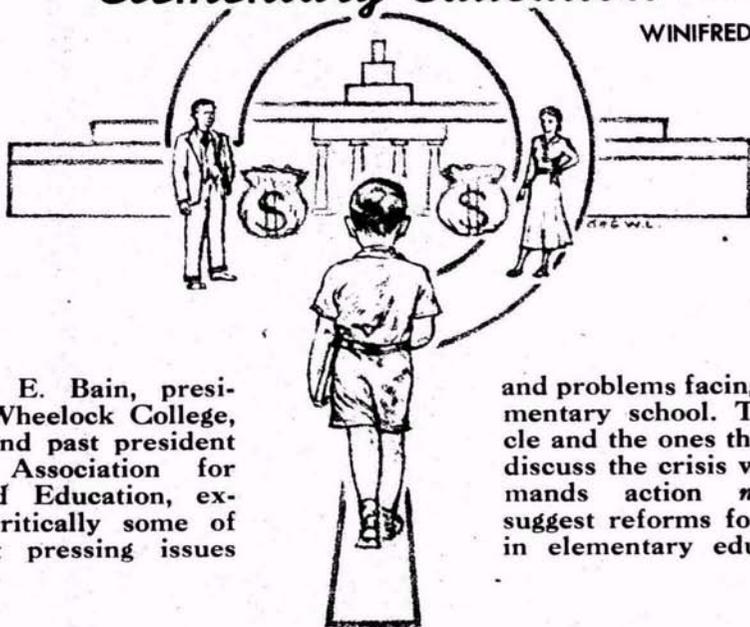


The Challenge to Elementary Education

WINIFRED E. BAIN



Winifred E. Bain, president of Wheelock College, Boston, and past president of the Association for Childhood Education, examines critically some of the most pressing issues

and problems facing the elementary school. This article and the ones that follow discuss the crisis which demands action *now*—and suggest reforms for growth in elementary education.

AT NO TIME has it been so difficult to predict the future of elementary education as it is now. Yet at no other period has it been more important to peer ahead and to plan for our children's future. Here are some of the distressing conditions that today baffle and challenge educators.

How Will We House Them?

Elementary schools are crowded and unless we move quickly to provide additional facilities, they will become more congested each year. Children already born are pushing on toward the age of school entrance in such numbers that of a certainty there will be between nine and ten million more children in schools in 1958 than there were in 1948. Fortunately, this increase

will approach the schools gradually; but even so, the annual increases are enough to cause deep concern. There were about a half million more children in the schools in 1948-49 than in the previous year. There will be over a half million more this year than last. By 1953 and 1954, the annual increase will run well over a million.

In many ways our nation is ill prepared to care for and educate these children. Due to lack of priorities and appropriations for usual building and renovations during World War II, school buildings were old and many of them shabby at the end of the war. Inflationary building costs since that time have made it difficult to launch the construction programs required to meet the needs of the greatly in-

creased number of school children. It has been estimated that at present costs, \$10,000,000,000 will be needed for new school buildings in the next ten years.

Who Will Teach Them?

Elementary teachers are scarce. In 1948 institutions preparing teachers for work in elementary schools graduated about 20,000 new teachers, less than three fourths the number trained in 1941 at the beginning of the war when there were fewer children. At this rate there will be only 200,000 new elementary teachers from this source in the next ten-year period, whereas the estimated need is over a million.

Where Will the Money Come From?

Although school budgets have been increased quite generally throughout the country, funds currently available are not adequate to care for needs of the increased child population. Federal appropriations for schools in congested war production areas and for nursery schools and extended school services for children of working mothers, were discontinued after the war. States and local districts, pressed as they are by other demands, have been unable to finance the continuance of such services except in rare instances.

In school after school, classes are too large for good teaching. For many children, school time is rationed. They attend in multiple shifts for their share of each day or alternate days. Makeshift rooms and hastily constructed temporary buildings have sprung up all over the country. And we are not yet even close to the peak of the demand that will be made on the schools.

Education Is in the News!

Despite this picture of gloom, there are some very hopeful signs. The very threat that children of the United States will be deprived of an adequate education has aroused unprecedented interest in children and elementary schools. Children are in the news! Schools and teachers make front page headlines; magazine articles and radio programs are helping to sensitize the public to our tremendous problems.

Public recognition was given first to the need for increasing teachers' salaries. It was reasoned that if teachers were paid more adequately, young people would be attracted to the profession. When enough teachers were available, they could be hired to solve the schools' problems.

Now forward-looking people are discovering that it will take more than salaries to care for the nation's children. Even where salaries have been increased, there is still a shortage of elementary teachers. Nothing can persuade teachers to undertake the job alone without the support of parents who will cooperate in providing conditions that will give them the opportunity to do what should be done for children and help them to achieve the satisfactions that result from doing a job well—a job that has significance to the welfare and progress of mankind.

For instance, if teachers are to derive personal satisfactions from jobs, class size must be reduced and adequate classroom and play space must be provided. In high schools the size of classes is regulated by accrediting agencies. The elementary schools have no such protection. It is generally and errone-

cously thought that little children need less space than older children.

Salary schedules that provide less pay for teaching younger children than older ones must be revised. There are many strongholds of tradition where teachers of elementary grades cannot look forward to the same financial compensation as teachers in secondary schools. "Only a grade teacher" should never be used to describe one who knows young children and who guides their learnings in all the manifold fields that are necessary for dealing with problems of living.

The home and social life of elementary teachers should be taken into consideration. So often the work with younger children takes a teacher to isolated neighborhoods and areas whereas high schools tend to be more centrally located. All teachers should be allowed the privilege of marriage and family life. There are still communities where women teachers are dismissed after their marriage.

Criticism—an Asset

A hopeful sign lies in the fact that people are not only concerned about the schools but are critical of them. Since more money must be spent for schools, since teachers' salaries are increased, people want their money's worth. In all likelihood, this critical attitude will increase with the years. At first blush this does not seem to be a hopeful sign. But any indication that patrons want better schools for children should be welcomed by the teaching profession.

A real difficulty lies in the fact that many people are ill informed about what constitutes a good program of

education for children. There is a tendency in the uninformed public to go back to old patterns, assuming them to be satisfactory. They point out that even before the present tidal wave of children, and well within the experience of many who are still at work in the schools, there were crowded classes, morning and afternoon sessions, inadequate buildings with wretched basement toilets, and little or no equipment.

But we know more now about the physical, intellectual, and emotional needs of children. We know that early patterns of growth are crucial in the development of a child's personality. We know more about the ways in which education can help prepare for living in our democratic society.

Enlisting the Aid of Parents

There are numerous ways to capitalize on the critical interest of parents in schools. Teachers are in a strategic position to help parents understand the needs of children, and one way to do this is to enlist their help in classroom work. Such participation gives parents a feeling of belonging to the school and, if properly administered, affords opportunity for them to gain, at first hand, an understanding of the school and its problems. They will be in better position, then, to advocate proper school legislation and adequate school appropriations.

Parents, not teachers, are the ones who should fight the battles for schools, if battles are needed. Schools are not established for teachers but for children and their parents. But teachers are the experts who can help parents understand what action to take in providing better schools for their children.

Enlisting Help of High School Youth

Another way of making virtue of necessity is to secure the help of high school students in the elementary schools. There are many things that youthful hands can do, and those very hands are the ones that are seeking their life work. While they are helping they are also having opportunity to discover that the most challenging work in the world is that of guiding the growth of little human beings. Many secondary school teachers will claim that high school programs are so exacting that they demand all the time of the students except, perhaps, the very bright ones.

There are two answers to this objection. Every young person needs to spend some time in choosing his life work. And the fact that candidates for teaching in high schools are now in over-supply may be due in part to the recency of experience of young people in this area. Participation in work with younger children by high school students nearing the end of their course might enlist their interest in grade teaching. The other answer is that if bright high school pupils can afford more time in exploration than others, then by all means let the bright ones help in the elementary grades. Good minds are needed to understand young children and the subtle processes of helping them with their problems.

Crisis Offers Opportunities

The present scene offers opportunities to determine what is best for chil-

dren. For instance, with the inescapable need for new buildings, we should develop new concepts of the kind of school buildings young children should have. Could it be that the huge million dollar plant is not the best environment for learning? Perhaps we should have little homelike schools for little people.

And again, teachers in the elementary schools should be evaluating and developing new teaching materials and equipment. Just to use the materials that happen to be available for handling crowds of children in an emergency won't do.

Teachers should be re-examining the curriculum to weed out old hates, prejudices, and fears that have already produced their harvest in wars and misery. Now of all times in a world of insecurity and unrest, the schools should be havens of intellectual and emotional security.

The Responsibility Is Ours

All this is not said to urge individual teachers to unwarranted aspirations that they alone will be able to save the nation's children for democracy, although in the last analysis that is the job which lies ahead in the United States in the next ten years. Individual teachers in the front line of action have a grave responsibility. But the job is bigger than the individual. It is a responsibility of all society. Schools must help mobilize all forces to work together for the education and welfare of the nation's children.



Copyright © 1949 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.