

Current Issues in Teacher Education

WALTER E. HAGER

"Conflict regarding some of these issues is becoming so great that we can hardly hope to do really good work in preparing teachers until the issues are resolved," asserts Walter E. Hager, president, Wilson Teachers College, Public Schools of the District of Columbia, Washington, D. C., and chairman, Council on Cooperation in Teacher Education.

AN ANNOUNCEMENT was made in 1951 that the Ford Foundation had given a considerable grant of money to the State of Arkansas to finance a demonstration in teacher education over a period of years. Although the details of the demonstration are left to the educational leaders in the state, it seems apparent that the program to be demonstrated must consist essentially of four years of education in the traditional disciplines, followed by a year of internship under selected master teachers with some lectures or instruction in theory and principles of teaching during this year.

The December 1951 issue of *The Survey* carried an article by Adelaide Nichols Baker challenging state and local school authorities to modify present rigid requirements for teaching licenses. According to her, the requirements in professional education courses have caused the schools to lose "many potential teachers who might have been saved to them by a more receptive attitude toward the knowledge and skills they possessed and a creative effort to supplement them by in-service training."

These two instances, and others which might be cited, are evidences that there is widespread disagreement re-

garding the nature and amount of professional preparation needed by teachers. Not all current issues in teacher education are embodied or implied in these examples, but they serve to emphasize several of the more significant ones.

ISSUES INVOLVING THE NATURE OF TEACHER PREPARATION

One of the most pressing issues now facing teacher educators may be presented in the question, "How much professional preparation for teachers is needed in addition to, or along with, the mastery of the subject or subjects to be taught?" Probably this is an inadequate statement of the problem, but at least it suggests the issue.

Until recently most educators thought that the desirability of rather extensive professional preparation of teachers was well established. During the last year or two, this assumption has been challenged with increasing vigor. The educational leaders in the Ford Foundation seem to be saying that teachers need some professional skills and understandings, but that these can be acquired quite satisfactorily from a master teacher during a year of internship. Adelaide Baker says about the same thing. She seems to be con-

vinced that a young teacher will get along well with professional instruction given to him during his early teaching years, provided he has had a good liberal education and has acquired a scholarly mastery of the fields he is teaching.

On the other side are those who believe that teaching is a profession which requires careful preparation—mastery of subjects to be taught, a profound understanding of how children grow, skill in directing this growth, skill in working with people, and a knowledge of the place and function of the school in our society. It is urged that these knowledges and skills can and should be developed to the maximum degree possible before the person starts to teach.

It is coming as a distinct shock to many educators that this point of view is being challenged. But it is important to know that it is being challenged—and with vigor! Almost with bitterness. This issue will obviously receive much attention during the next five or six years—far more than most educators have hitherto expected. The demonstration in Arkansas will be followed with interest and concern. The results there and the outcome of the debate upon the issue everywhere may affect in a profound way the nature of teacher education in the United States for generations to come.

Timing of Professional Preparation

The next issue suggested by the opening paragraphs of this article has to do with when the professional preparation should come. It might be stated thus: Is professional preparation something that can be given in a semes-

ter or two after the prospective teacher has mastered the subject or subjects he will teach? Or is the professional preparation something that must be distributed over a period of several years and perhaps be related closely to the subjects to be taught, even integrated with the subject matter?

Those who favor the former of the two possibilities seem to assume that professional preparation consists of acquiring certain skills and that this can be done almost any time. Indeed, some of them apparently believe that it is best concentrated in a relatively short period after subjects to be taught have been mastered. In this way, it is thought that the student can more likely focus attention on his major subject in a scholarly way during the early part of his education, and concentrate upon the professional elements in the later part.

Those who favor something like the second of the two possibilities believe that professional preparation does not consist merely of a set of skills to be mastered and added to knowledge of subjects to be taught. They believe that professional preparation includes a vast array of subject matter of its own; that even though certain skills must be acquired, they must be based upon a profound understanding of human beings—how they grow and how they interact—and that this understanding can be acquired only by a study just as scholarly as that required in the more traditional disciplines. These persons believe also that professional preparation requires the maturing which can come only if it is extended over a period of several years—probably three at least. Finally, they believe

that there is no such thing as "method" apart from the subject *and* children to be taught—that children and method and teaching subjects must be studied all at the same time if there is to be developed the best professional competence.

The third issue suggested by our opening examples is implied in the question, "What should be the essential nature of preparation for teaching?" The issue seems to be: Should the focus of teacher preparation be upon subject matter and how to teach it? Or should the prospective teacher be required to concentrate primarily upon children and how they grow as individuals and as members of a living, vital society—a society which has a stake in their growth? Persons who support the latter point of view agree that subject matter is important, tremendously important, but insist that it is not an end in itself. The prospective teacher must learn how subjects studied can contribute to the desirable growth of children in their society.

In considering these three issues, it should not be assumed that the conflict is entirely between liberal arts colleges on one side, and teachers colleges on the other. One of the most highly professional and most demanding programs for the preparation of teachers in the country is being developed in a liberal arts college.¹

ISSUES INVOLVING STANDARDS AND ACCREDITATION OF INSTITUTIONS

According to the NEA Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards, there are 1217 institutions of

¹ Adelphi College, Garden City, Long Island, New York.

higher education in the United States preparing teachers. Only 256 of these are accredited by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. Most of the others are approved only by their own State Departments of Education, or not at all.

There is a growing feeling among leaders in the teaching profession that too many of the institutions preparing teachers have inferior facilities or programs of doubtful value. At least, it is believed that there are insufficient provisions for making sure that persons entering the teaching profession are well prepared. On the other side, there are prominent and influential educators who believe that there are too many accrediting agencies and that increased accrediting activity in any field should be opposed. The issues seem to be covered by the following questions:

- Is approval by a State Department of Education sufficient?
- If not, should regional accrediting associations do the job?
- Or, should a new national agency for accrediting teacher education institutions be established—one that would be more broadly representative and operate more extensively than the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education?
- In any event, what kind of standards for the preparation of teachers should be set up? And, who should make them?

In order to arrive at answers to these questions, an ad hoc committee was set up during the year 1951 consisting of representatives from the NEA Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards, the National Coun-

cil of Chief State School Officers, the National School Boards Association, the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. After several meetings and long deliberation, this Committee brought forth its recommendations. In brief, it recommends that (a) there be established a National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education; (b) this National Council consist of representatives of the teaching profession, of the lay public (the school boards), the legal state education agencies, and the teacher education institutions; (c) this National Council be empowered to establish standards for teacher education, and set up accredited lists of institutions based upon the standards; (d) the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education continue its accrediting function until the new Council is prepared to operate.

These proposals will undoubtedly be opposed in several quarters. One thing seems to be clear—there is certain to be some kind of accreditation of teacher education institutions. Probably this accreditation will affect a greater number of teacher preparing institutions than has been true in the past. The only questions seem to be: What kind of an agency will do the job? How will it function? These questions will be answered within the next year or two. And the answers will be of significance both to the teacher education institutions and to the teaching profession.

OTHER MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES

In the early part of this article we discussed what might be called the sub-

ject matter versus the child development emphasis in the preparation of teachers. There are many persons, probably an increasing number, who say that no matter which emphasis is made, the really important problem is whether or not we are preparing the kinds of teachers needed in our democracy. These persons ask pointedly the following questions:

- Do we really prepare teachers to carry responsibility? To exercise initiative? To be leaders? To face professional and civic problems with courage?
- Do we really prepare teachers to think critically—about important civic and national problems as well as about professional problems?
- Do we really educate teachers to have a broad knowledge of world problems?

We are urged to recognize that these are the first essentials for teachers in our democracy if they are to educate our next generation to meet and solve the problems of a nation which has to assume world leadership. And we are led to believe that we may not be doing the job! Here is something to give us pause, no matter what we may believe should be the basic form and structure of teacher education.

The final issue we shall face is one which concerns all educators, and indeed all laymen. It is contained in the way we answer the question, "Are we expecting too much of teachers, especially of elementary teachers?"

In the last fifty years the job of the teacher has become unbelievably complicated. What makes the situation especially bad is that there is no agreement, among educators or among laymen, as to just what should reasonably

be expected of the teacher. Even so, there is strong support for most of the following:

- The teacher must have a mastery of the subjects he teaches.
- The teacher must be a specialist in human growth and development. He must know how children grow and how to guide that growth. He must know how to work with parents, and how to help them guide the growth of their children.
- All teachers must share in the health education program.
- All teachers must be competent in the use of the radio, television, motion pictures and other visual and auditory aids.
- All teachers must be civic leaders. At least be prepared to help with civic endeavors.
- Elementary teachers must be experts in teaching the three R's. They must be similarly expert in teaching art, music, physical education, social studies, literature, speech. Yes, and character, ethics, morals.
- On top of all, numerous pressure groups insist upon particular slants to the teaching. One group insists upon stressing citizenship. Another wants the teaching of Americanism to be dominant. Another demands stress upon maintaining our present economic organization. Etc., etc.

Most of the demands are really defensible, even desirable. The question is: Can the teacher do it all? Much of the criticism of modern education arises in part from the fact that teachers cannot possibly do all that is being demanded of them. We are trying to get a modern job in education with the same machinery we had in 1890. By

this, we mean chiefly that we have added tremendously to what we expect of teachers, but we are maintaining about the same staffs—the same pupil-teacher ratios we had in the late 19th century. Shall we increase staff and cut the teacher loads so that teachers can do well all that is now considered essential in good education? Or, shall we decide that this isn't possible, and delimit the teacher's job narrowly? If so, which parts shall we eliminate? And what should be done about them? These questions must be answered soon.

In presenting this list of issues it must be recognized that in connection with most of them, the writer has revealed his own bias. This has been done deliberately because in these instances the professionally desirable course of action seems to be so obvious. What is more important is to note that no attempt has been made to make the list complete. It must be admitted that there are other issues which many educators may consider nearly or quite as significant as the ones listed here. Every person who endeavors to identify current issues in teacher education will probably come out with a different list.

In any event, it must be recognized that there are vital questions to be answered and vital issues to be resolved in the field of teacher education. Many of them are not really new but have been troubling educators for a long time. Only the emphasis or the intensity changes. The conflict regarding some of these issues is becoming so great that we can hardly hope to do really good work in preparing teachers until the issues are resolved. All of them are worthy of the best thinking that devoted teachers can give.

Copyright © 1952 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.