



The Teacher as Citizen

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Before analyzing the teacher's rights as citizen, asserts the author of this article, one should examine carefully whether this or that citizen is entitled to be a teacher.

THE TEACHER'S rights as a citizen have been a subject of discussion within the profession for many decades. Reams of newsprint and even larger quantities of better-grade paper have been devoted to advancing or disputing the thesis that teachers are entitled to conduct themselves precisely as lawyers or salesmen or plumbers conduct themselves: that they have a right to take an active role in party politics, or to eschew public affairs to the point of refraining

from so much as registering; that they are entitled to identify themselves as vigorously as they please with the religion of their choice, or to devote their Sundays to golf or grading papers; that their personal conduct should be subject to no restraints not imposed upon the community at large.

It seems to the present writer that we have generally formulated this problem backwards—or, at least, in a way designed to obscure rather than to

clarify it. We have assumed an individual fully entitled to be a teacher, and have then asked, "Should this person also enjoy all the rights, privileges, immunities and latitudes which are by custom accorded to others in the community?" Reasonable people have answered this question in the affirmative with a uniformity that might well have made us suspect our statement of the problem. Instead, we have preferred to conclude that all who raise the question are simply unreasonable—as some of them, heaven knows, are.

There is no profit at all in asking whether this or that teacher is entitled to the rights of other citizens. The answer is yes, and that's the end of the matter. The real question—the one involved in virtually every actual case that has ever come up—is whether this or that citizen is entitled to be a teacher.

The Teacher as "Attitude-Cultivator"

If John Smith, who teaches mathematics in the high school of a small industrial community, accepts an invitation to join a luncheon club composed exclusively of business and professional men, his action raises a question in the minds of local union members. If Henry Brown, the history teacher, feels impelled to show his sympathy for labor—or for a particular cause, or demand, or protest—by marching in a picket-line, his action raises a question in the minds of the business community. In both cases, the question—so far as it is legitimate—takes the form, "What do you suppose that man says to his students?"

So long as teachers in any appreciable

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number consider it their job to instill in young people, by precept and example, the attitudes they ought to have, we can expect every segment of the public to regard the teacher's out-of-school activities as a fair index of the direction of his influence in the classroom. It is possible to conceive of a difference between the attitudes one regards as "right" and those which he espouses himself; but any such discrepancy would surely be quite exceptional. The teacher who seeks to cultivate the "right" attitudes in young people will generally admit that he could substitute the words "my attitudes" for "the right attitudes" without altering the operational meaning of the sentence.

There is, of course, no necessary incompatibility between the teacher's active participation in public affairs and his conception of his job as one of developing *some* right attitudes in students. One could list a great many generalized attitudes, related to such matters as tolerance, or courtesy, or free inquiry, upon which all segments of the community believe themselves (often mistakenly, but that is of no moment here) to be in agreement. Moreover, no group is likely to be disturbed if the literature teacher imbues the class with his own fervent enthusiasm for Ibsen as against Shakespeare.

The teacher who confines his classroom activities (as many teachers once did) to a clearly delimited subject-matter in which — putatively, at least — he has special competence, can easily set at rest the concern of any group

about his activities as a member of the community. The exceptions to this principle are the teachers of the social studies, who can follow this particular route to security only by limiting their offerings to history (taught without any applications to the current scene) and geography.

Current Issues and Freedom of Inquiry

Two developments, however, have made it necessary for teachers as a group to face up to a very real problem with regard to the relation between the teacher's activities as citizen and his role as "attitude-cultivator": (a) the growing insistence that schools must deal with current issues, and (b) the growing tendency of teachers (with or without the aid of special administrative arrangements) to disregard subject-matter lines and to push an inquiry into any field that seems likely to yield relevant material.

It is very nearly inconceivable that the major groups in any community will knowingly tolerate a school staffed with teachers who answer to the following description:

(1) They take an active part in community affairs, where they reveal strong and definite views on controversial matters.

(2) They insist upon the right to cultivate in pupils what they see as desirable attitudes concerning the matters that arise within the classroom.

(3) They feel free to deal in class with almost any matter that may come up, and in particular they insist that controversial topics must be a part of the curriculum.

At this point the writer has, of

course, exposed himself to the charge of belaboring a straw man. It is easy to admit the incompatibility of the three propositions enumerated above, and then to say, "But no teacher would claim the right to instill his own attitudes into his pupils. The teacher's purpose is to help students see as many sides as possible of every question and then reach their own independent judgments."

Certainly this answer is adequate, provided that it is true. It should be pointed out, however, that (a) the answer may not be true; (b) if it is true, the general public does not believe it; (c) unless it is both true and believed to be true, we cannot reasonably hope to maintain both the freedom of teachers as active citizens and the modern school curriculum based upon what we have found out about the nature of the learning process. These points will now be considered.

Helping Pupils Reach Their Own Conclusions

(1) *It may not be true that teachers generally seek to help pupils reach their own conclusions.* A fairly extensive inquiry would be necessary before anyone could speak with assurance upon this point. The present writer has observed a considerable number of teachers who seemed to him to be laboring earnestly at the task of persuading young people to share the sentiments, opinions, attitudes and even prejudices which the teachers themselves expressed or revealed. Usually the views being inculcated in such cases were conservative or mildly reactionary, which reduces the likelihood of public protest.

Even granting, however, that the vast majority of teachers *intend* to assist their pupils toward independent judgments, it is by no means certain that they can live up to this intention. The writer vividly recalls observing a teacher who avowed as her sole aim the development of independent thinking among her pupils. The class had embarked upon the discussion of such current events as happened to be treated in the weekly paper to which they subscribed for this purpose. The lead story was on the then-current coal strike. A boy in the class delivered himself of the idea, "If miners would be sensible with their money, instead of throwing it all away on whiskey, they'd find that their wages were more than they need."

The teacher moved in fast. Under a barrage of well-placed questions, the lad admitted that (1) he had no idea how much a miner was paid; (2) he had no firsthand knowledge of the personal habits of miners; (3) his sole source for the view he had announced was a muttered reaction of his father's at the breakfast table; (4) he doubted if his father had any actual information on either of the relevant points; (5) he recognized that one ought not to make such a drastic or sweeping generalization unless he had facts to back it up. So far, so good.

The next reaction came from a girl who remarked with deep feeling that whenever men strike they lose money, and that this fact so disturbs their wives as to upset their home life very seriously. "So," she concluded, "I think that whenever men strike they must be in the right, or they wouldn't do a thing that's going to be so un-

pleasant for them." The writer's eyes were on the teacher as he waited for this avowed foe of the facile generalization to swing into action. All that the teacher did, however, was to beam and announce solemnly, "Helen, that's what I call a very nice insight."

Most of us are probably too sophisticated to fall into any such blatant contravention of our avowed principles; yet the danger is always present. We know that reflection can be stimulated only as doubt is aroused; that the proponent of an idea cannot really consider it unless he is challenged in a way that makes him wonder about its soundness. We know that to entertain an idea involves more than welcoming it with a smile—that, as Dewey says, "'Come right in, there's nobody home' is not quite equivalent to hospitality." And yet, with the best will in the world, we find it enormously difficult to do anything more to an idea with which we agree than merely greet it with fair words.

Many will say that the major failure in this example was the teacher's refusal to give the class itself a chance to do the job of challenging *both* ideas; and they will be quite right. Sometimes, however, the teacher has to offer the *first* challenge in order to get an idea considered at all. The writer's sole point is that the teacher who subjects to reflective examination *only* those ideas which he regards as "wrong" is engaged in fact (whatever his aim) in cultivating his own attitudes within his students.

(2) *Even if most teachers are actually helping students toward independent judgment, the public does not uniformly believe this to be the case.*

The idea of making sure that all relevant opinions—even one's own—are challenged and scrutinized is not likely to occur to anyone but a teacher. Such an approach would cost a salesman most of his commissions, lose for a doctor the confidence of his patients, or get a lawyer disbarred for failing properly to represent his clients — and rightly so. Even in ordinary conversation, the general practice is for each person to make out the best possible case for his own point of view and try to persuade others to accept it.

Many young adults have, indeed, encountered teachers who put their trust in a process and let the outcomes take care of themselves. It is not difficult to persuade anyone who has had this kind of experience that competent professional teachers have no desire to "sell" their own views—or, indeed any views—to their pupils. But most adults have had few school experiences which would lead them to any such understanding.

(3) *Unless the public believes that teachers are actually conducting open inquiry, rather than peddling their own preferences, either the curriculum or the teacher's freedom as citizen is almost sure to be adversely affected.*

Children have an intrinsic importance to their parents and their teachers. They have also a quite different sort of importance to a great many other people. They are prospective voters in a society in which control of the national government has become a great economic and social prize. They constitute already a substantial market for many kinds of goods, and they will soon become a greater one. They are the clients, the customers, the patients,

the parishioners, the audiences of the future and to some extent of the present—and they have a considerable influence with their families.

It is possible to show almost any reasonable taxpayer that the school cannot be an agency for molding this vast captive audience to his private advantage. But it is not possible to persuade him that *anyone else* should enjoy the advantage of such an opportunity. When he encounters, in the day-to-day struggles of pressure and politics, some opponents who happen also to be teachers, he is bound to wonder whether they may not be exercising on behalf of *their side* the kind of influence upon the rising generation which he and others like him are forbidden to exercise.

Somehow or other, he must be reassured that this is not the case. The first step in this direction, so far as our profession is concerned, must be to make sure that he can honestly be so reassured. Ultimately, this would mean making sure that no one could be certified to teach who had not demonstrated a thorough understanding of the reflective process and a commitment to its encouragement which transcended any private loyalty. Practically, it means as close an approach to this ideal as is compatible with turning out enough teachers to staff our schools.

Unless we can meet this challenge we shall face growing pressures from various competing groups to staff our schools only with "their side" or with "neutrals." Practically, this will mean employing only "neutrals" or people willing to act like "neutrals" regarding all important questions—that is to say, ciphers or worms. At the same time,

there will be continuing pressures to restore the curriculum to a condition of sharply-delimited separation between subjects, with each teacher expected to "stick to his specialization."

To yield on either one of these fronts would be to give up the fruits of long and arduous struggle. The alternative—by no means an easy one—is to make sure that all of us who teach know clearly what we are about, and then that the general public gradually comes to know what we are trying to accomplish.

Does the foregoing argument imply that the teacher should make it a point in the classroom to *conceal* his own attitudes? Not at all, although he may properly elect to do so, for pedagogical reasons, at any given time. The teacher who recommends reflective thinking to students presumably does so on the ground that this process leads one to sounder, more warranted judgments than can be secured in other ways. Pupils are entitled to assume that the teacher employs the method he recom-

mends, and they may well want to see a sample or two of the judgments that have resulted. If the teacher responds in the manner of Simple Simon, "Indeed, I haven't any," his effectiveness as an exponent of reflective thought will be limited. The barber who insists on wearing a hat at his work may recommend a remedy for baldness ever so eloquently, but he has little prospect of selling any.

The point is not that the teacher's views ought to be *secret*, even from his pupils; it is, rather, that neither he nor they should attach any special *importance* to an idea simply because the teacher happens to hold it. When it has come to pass that in most classrooms the teacher's idea is received as "just another idea," amenable to the same sorts of treatment and subject to the same tests which apply to the ideas of students, writers, radio commentators, or anyone else, a high proportion of the problems associated with the label, "The Teacher as Citizen," will have evaporated.

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