

How Are Your New Teachers Doing Now?

WILLARD ABRAHAM

A continuing responsibility of our profession is treated in this article—that of assisting and sustaining the new teacher in her critical first year in the classroom. Positive suggestions are given for meeting this need.

AT THE start of each school year there is a rash of articles in the professional magazines about the adjustment of the new teacher who is, at the same time, given a friendly send-off into her first teaching experiences. But what happens when the orientation week is over and summer vacations are no longer the subject of countless dreary homework assignments? She is certainly still "green" on many of the procedures, relationships and materials of her profession; but who is *now* taking the responsibility for seeing that frustrations do not accumulate and that her teaching career doesn't begin—and end—with this first difficult year? Although some schools and systems have well-planned in-service training programs for their newcomers, perhaps they are not evaluated and revised frequently enough to see whether they meet the ever-changing needs of the beginning teacher.

Let's look in on her now that she is well into her first year. Maybe by this time the glow has begun to wear off a bit, and she has to have help in recognizing that thousands of others have problems similar to those she is facing.

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Let's observe more than the teacher herself, the setting in which she is working, and realize that if we don't do something right *now* to satisfy her needs she may not be around next year at this time! By then she may be selling stockings, running a motel or pounding a typewriter in some office, and glad to be away from the children, their parents and the other teachers.

From Theory to Practice

During that vital first year she is confronted, among many other situations, by the apparent conflict between what she has learned and what she now observes. Some experienced teachers are always eager to capitalize on this, saying, "Well, that may have been a good *theory*, but it certainly won't work in *practice!*" At first she may not see through the flimsiness of this logic. The new teacher doesn't have experience to back her up, and when those in the field for many years are critical of newer thoughts and methods, she may be rather easily convinced by them. It is difficult for her to keep a clear perspective of what she has heard during her preparation and what she is now hearing. However, she must realize that it is not necessary for one to lose sight of one's ideals, nor does she have to trade

the convincing explanations of how children learn and develop which she accepted earlier for the between-you-and-me-word-to-the-wise which is spoken and heard today.

The ability to listen to, and then to weigh and measure advice, suggestions and specific techniques, is a worthwhile personal quality. Even though she wants to try practices she doesn't see in operation, patience may pay huge dividends; after developing a good working relationship with others in her school, not only will she be able to do what she feels is important, but she may also have some of the other teachers "along for the ride"—and ultimately convinced that there is something to these ideas of the past ten or twenty years!

The newcomer who recognizes her limitations, which she hopes time will eliminate, gains far more in the long run by accepting—at least temporarily—the school and its teachers as they are. It may appear to her during that tough first year that nothing has changed since she went to school; not only will she not be able to bring any changes about, she feels, but the rigid atmosphere will not permit her to be herself and to teach as she believes is best. Such thoughts are frequent among young teachers, but subject to revision by their second and third years when the older teachers mellow in their relationships with the new ones as mutual respect is built up based on knowing and understanding each other.

However, the impatient, strong-willed individual who must see immediate progress and who can't wait to know and be known, may talk too much, step on toes—and be out of a job by the end

of the year! If the free give-and-take of discussion is replaced by suspicions and disagreeable conversations, the effort toward improvement is lost. The line of Chesterton which says, "The thing I hate most about an argument is that it always interrupts a discussion," certainly hits the mark.

Conform or Oppose?

Some attitudes must, of course, be maintained despite pressures which we know lead to unhealthy teaching—for example, by the teacher who insists that learning and fun or enjoyment are in different spheres, or the one who maintains that perfect quiet is a sign of a working, thinking, accomplishing class. On the other hand, the new teacher should not work herself into a state of opposition toward either her college instructors or the teachers and administrators with whom she is working; with very little effort she could get to be like Mark Twain's mother who said that she always discounted 99% of what he said and the rest was pure gold! Independence of thought is a fine thing, but it can be carried too far if we insist on discarding completely the work of those with longer—though not necessarily "better"—insight.

"Easy does it" is probably the best suggestion that persons in teaching can give the new arrival. The old-timers ought not expect perfection, but in order to be prepared, the newcomer should also expect less than immediate acceptance from them. And because change is slow in our profession, we can always accomplish a great deal more if we enter it knowing that fact. It's important to be aware, however, that changes *do* come—with tenacity of pur-

pose, time and the good will of persons working together to accomplish them.

The problem of whether to conform or not reaches a climax in the new occupational life of the young teacher in her relationships with children. Even before she meets her class she may hear that Johnny is "a little devil," Bill is "unmanageable," and Sue is "a bad influence on the others." These so-called problem children are reminiscent of the Emerson quotation which reads, "And what is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not been discovered."

The line of least resistance for the teaching novice is to follow judgments of the more experienced teachers instead of absorbing whatever test, health and anecdotal materials might be in a

child's cumulative folder. Not that the folder will always be more revealing than the "helpful hints" dropped by the former teachers of the children; actually, it may reveal the same subjective attitudes and inability to see things through their eyes.

Frequently the young teacher's analysis of the basic needs of her students is as limited as the understandings of some of their former teachers. We sometimes think we have children "figured out," and yet because they are youngsters years after we were, in an era far different from our youth of the war, the depression, the boom of the 20's, or before, we can't possibly see the world as they see it. In addition, the new teacher may not recognize what is



important to them. For example, do we realize how easily they can be hurt emotionally, and what permanent effects such pain can have? If we judge children by adult standards of mental anguish, we might assume that the loss of health, money or a loved one through death is at the top of painful situations. But is that true? What, at different ages, causes the most tears, the greatest heartbreak?

Do you remember the painful incidents in the early part of *Of Human Bondage* when the club-footed Philip was ridiculed and chased by a group of curious boys? Seldom do we face anything in adult life which provides as much emotional turmoil as did the derisive laughter at his expense. And, in *Stella Dallas*, what about the little girl's birthday party to which no one came? Was this not the acme in heartache to which a human being could be exposed?

How little understanding we have of the sensitivities of children is even more apparent in real life when we observe the use of sarcasm, bullying and discourtesy toward them by both teachers and parents, even more than by other children. Many hurts we inflict on children can be avoided—the singling out of the shy individual for obviously special attention, the faulty conclusions arrived at regarding the sleepy boy who delivers papers morning and night and is embarrassed before his friends by a tactless teacher, the rudeness of constant autocracy and bossiness from the front of the room.

If we know child development in general, we are ready to anticipate the individual quirks which invariably occur. The need for such anticipation, however, should be pointed out frequently

to the beginning teacher. Expectations vary from teacher to teacher, but the important factor is to know what to expect from *this* child at *this* stage in *his* development.

A newcomer needs specific help. But who is there to receive her SOS? Who will listen when she has to air her frustrations? Who is around when she is seriously thinking of forgetting the profession and her years of preparation for it—and to keep her from taking that final step of writing a letter of resignation or of not signing next year's contract? Who can help her when she is upset by teacher cliques, gripers and tale-carriers, assignments nobody else wants, and the heavy load of records, reports, committees and collections? Isn't there someone who can humor her when her scanty pay check won't quite cover the price of a new dress she would like to have? Does in-service training eliminate her tiredness some afternoons when she has just pulled on and tied or buckled forty pairs of heavy overshoes, her feeling when she has had to eat some dry sandwiches for lunch because there is no clean restaurant in the neighborhood, or her antagonism when certain of the older teachers indicate that her ideas are unwanted because her few months in teaching cannot compare with their many years of experience?

Into this situation of suppressed emotions the colleges which prepare teachers must enter, working with the public and private school systems whenever a cooperative arrangement can be made. Seminars, social affairs, follow-up questionnaires and workshops can provide the opportunity new teachers need to talk about their problems among those who understand that such difficulties

are to be expected. When a new teacher is in a locality away from her own college, then it would enrich her experience to be invited to meet at the nearest college or university with others who are also starting out, for a single get-together or a series of them, under the guidance of a faculty member who is interested in the problems these young people face. If we in the field of education are really concerned about getting and holding the best teachers it is essential that we start with those who want to teach and have demonstrated that desire in concrete terms. The least we can do is see that their problems get a sympathetic hearing, and that they understand they are far from being alone in their profession.

Colleges long ago set up the procedure of "big brothers" and "big sisters" for their students. Maybe a similar kind of arrangement would be of value during the new teacher's entire first year. Thus far the emphasis in assistance has been too strongly on the first week or two, while "the danger period" actually comes during the coldest part of the winter or during the spring when a letdown occurs for many of us as tiredness catches up with us.

In their individual and collective ways the school systems and colleges can help make this transition from student to teacher as satisfying as the prospective teacher hoped it would be. Assistance must come while we still have these people who want to be teachers, for once they are lost to us they usually come back only if a pressure other than their own basic desire to teach drives them back. By that time the initial enthusiasm of bringing enjoyment and beauty through learning may be lost.

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NEW YORK 11, N. Y.

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