

Let's Clean Our Own House!

Perhaps a time of stress is a good time for us to look at our shortcomings. This article gives a keen analysis of some of our deficiencies in bringing practices into line with principles.

SO MUCH criticism has been hurled at the field of education in recent years that perhaps it's time for us to turn a bright spotlight on ourselves. There are many signs which indicate a need in education for cleaning up, a process which only we in the teaching profession can do effectively and with understanding.

What Are Our Deficiencies?

Here we will attempt to show some of our deficiencies as we see them, and although all of these certainly will not apply to the situation in which each of us is now teaching, a number may seem uncomfortably familiar.

This list is far from exhaustive; you can no doubt add others which you consider to be more serious than some included below. And even the five areas referred to do not receive thorough treatment; the effort here is to provide a catalyst toward analysis and perhaps action by merely introducing the problem at this time.

● *Research.* All it takes is a casual conversation with many undergraduate and graduate students to show how limited their acquaintance is with recent research in their area of concentration. Whether it is lack of training or disinterest which causes this void in teacher training and growth doesn't

really matter. The important fact is that many of our teachers are uninformed and are doing nothing about this situation.

And what about the teachers who have already completed their preparations? Do they use the numerous available research sources in order to adapt their teaching to today's children? Do they belong to professional organizations, read their journals, and participate in their conferences? Are they aware of studies which will support modern methods of teaching in a core or consolidated whole? Have those on the secondary school level, for example, read and used the results of the "Eight Year Study" in discussions with the parents of their children?

Isaac Newton once said something about seeming to see farther than others because he stood on the shoulders of giants. Similarly, our own perspective can certainly be broadened if we make use of the knowledge unfolded through the research published by others. The fear of research has actually cheated us out of one of the major satisfactions in teaching, conducting small studies ourselves within the lab-

Willard Abraham is professor of education, Arizona State College, Tempe, Arizona.

oratories which are with us all the time—our own classrooms.

● *The college program.* Educational “gobbledygook” which is dependent on undefinable slogans and gimmicks has to be weeded out and replaced by talk, activities and ideas that make some sense to the young persons preparing to teach. If we tell college students that they should “take children where they are in their development,” then why don’t more of us do our best to recognize where individual college students are in *their* development? If we say that a variety of methods can be used in teaching on the elementary and secondary levels, why are so many of us slaves to the lecture method in our own college classrooms? If we really feel that using research would be good for our college students, why don’t we toss out our dog-eared, yellow notes and do a little research-digging of our own? And perhaps we can’t expect respect for research from students whose professors haven’t the time or inclination to do occasional studies in their own fields. (The professors may sometimes “pass the buck” of responsibility to their institutions, which frequently cannot provide assistance or course relief for the research-minded individual.)

If we continue to talk about pupil-teacher planning and evaluation, how do we think we can get away with the practice of preparing our materials in detail before we face the class, not changing those plans in any way after meeting the group, and never taking them into our confidence in connection with evaluation or grading? And lastly, if we believe that teachers (whether they are on the elementary,

secondary or college levels) must understand human beings and have the ability to get along with and adapt to them, then why do we forget, as soon as we complete our *own* Ph. D.’s, that the emphasis there is on research and often includes little consideration of many of the other qualities so essential to the classroom teacher in his relationship with students on all age levels?

Our student teaching practices are worth at least a moment’s consideration, too, especially when they are sometimes conducted with infrequent and inadequate supervision from the college, and when little effort is put into placing the students with teachers and under administrators who share most of the college’s point of view. That student teachers can learn by observing and working with “the bad” as well as “the good” is a questionable premise.

Every effort must, of course, be made to establish a friendly, helpful relationship with personnel in the schools where student teachers are placed. Perhaps it’s needless to say, too, that the college supervisors are not to go in with the idea of “making over” the curriculum, teaching methods or practices of the elementary or secondary school. On the other hand, continually pampering and kowtowing to those whose basic antagonisms remain belligerently set cannot provide the college student with an environment for student teaching which will give him satisfaction with his chosen profession.

● *Status quo versus change.* Have you ever considered how strange it is that in practically every field the new

and modern are lauded, welcomed, publicized, experimented with and given full chance to prove themselves before being either adopted or discarded? But not in education! If it's new, it may be ridiculed, questioned, dismissed before it's tried out, or avoided because recognition of it may make us suspect of some evil intentions. That fear of the new doesn't apply as strongly in school physical facilities, but haven't you noticed how often those shiny, *movable* desks are placed in perfectly straight rows because "they mess things up too much if they're moved around"?

We have a tendency to blame someone else for reluctance to try something new merely because it is a recent suggestion—"the administrators won't let us" or "those teachers are in a rut and won't ever take a chance on a new idea." Or else we use research in strange and devious ways to show that the "tried and true" are really best. Maybe you're acquainted with some of the studies which periodically indicate to us that our children can't write, read, spell or add with any degree of accuracy. It's a short step from this statement to mass condemnation of these so-called modern, newfangled methods of teaching, without an awareness of the fallacy of such reasoning. It is certainly wise to have complete evidence at hand before such conclusions are stated. For example, in the situation cited, wouldn't it be important to find out what tests were used on the children, and how reliable and valid these tests are? And—most important of all—were the methods of teaching to which they were exposed really "modern"?

It is not unusual to hear parents or teachers say, "These problems of emotional disturbances, slow-learners and discipline are all due to current methods of teaching. Now, when *I* was a child . . ." You know how that statement is often completed, but it *should* be finished in this way, ". . . when *I* was a child neither parents nor teachers were so alert and so well-informed as they are today about what to look for in problem situations. Techniques of child study and testing are rather new, and even now we don't know how to use them with complete adequacy. We do know, however, that causes for problems that children face in various adjustments, reading, and many school and home activities are not always so obvious that we can immediately put our finger on them. Children don't have any more problems than they used to have. It's just that we know now that they exist, have some methods of discerning them, and are on our way toward doing something about them through teachers, parents and educational specialists."

● *Curriculum.* If we are really serious about cleaning house, perhaps the best way and place to start is simultaneously in the curricula on all levels. We've already touched a bit on teacher preparation at the college level, but the lower schools are no less in need of evaluation. In how many of them, for example, are children still learning the alphabet and multiplication tables by pure rote and entirely out of the context of their daily experiences—merely because that was the way the teacher and Papa were taught many years ago? How many teachers are conscientiously preparing seat work all

summer for first grade children they've never seen because they want to be "well-prepared"?

Aren't there plenty of beginning teachers who are angry at their college professors who were reluctant about telling them "how to teach reading" or science or arithmetic—and who will live to recognize that their college teachers were right, that some things cannot be "told" but have to be learned on the basis of one's experience, personality and the children who are to be taught? And in the reading field, who are the teachers and administrators who insist that *all* first grade children must have a sight vocabulary of so many words before they can go on to second grade, regardless of the physical or social development of these children? And are they still insisting that all children in each grade use the same textbooks, even though there may be a reading range in the grade of as much as five or six years?

Many teachers still take it on their shoulders to evaluate the teaching of others, to the point of saying to them, "If you teach planets to them in second grade, what will I do with them when they reach fourth grade? I don't care if they did ask and are interested! You *know* the course of study specifically puts planets in the fourth grade!"

In another area we are very much in need of wise guidance and assistance. Despite the thousands of pages and millions of words devoted to the use of audio-visual aids in the curriculum, there is much evidence of their still being used ineffectively.

● *Attraction and selection of prospective teachers.* Colleges need students to make financial ends meet, and

schools need teachers to conduct their classes—but what about the most important person who is caught in this kind of a squeeze play? Who is considering the child who suffers because of the preparation for teaching of persons who may be intellectually and temperamentally unsuited to working with impressionable young people.

Many colleges have instituted screening practices which cut down to some extent the number of unqualified persons entering the teaching profession. These schools have a difficult time, however, standing up against the pressures of (a) financial need, (b) increasingly high enrollments in elementary schools, (c) college teachers with vested interests in classes which might have to be eliminated if these students are not admitted, and (d) college students who have majored in "occupationally - barren" academic fields, suddenly recognizing that their only route toward making a living is to cram in a series of Education courses as electives in their last college year.

Screening works two ways—attracting the best as well as diverting into other channels of endeavor those not well adapted to teaching. In order to attract the first group, we and the communities in which we are located have to recognize the factors which drive qualified persons into other lines of work. Salaries—both their size and inequalities—certainly are one of the major reasons for teaching being an undesirable life's work for many. If parents and others can be *shown* what happens to children in crowded classrooms with poorly trained teachers, part of the battle will be won. Let's not think that talk is enough; there's

been much too much of that already.

If we want the best persons to be encouraged to enter the field from the population as a whole, then we have to make our profession attractive, and perhaps even develop a system of financial subsidies to encourage into teaching those who hadn't considered it and others who could not even go to college without help. The fallacy of "free education" still lives on, although we now realize that the "free" secondary school and college frequently cost the family the loss of one income every pay day because a son or daughter is in school instead of working.

Discussion of these five areas is only a beginning to what can be said about the subjects mentioned. All of us can multiply the factors brought out under each category, and most of us would not limit our needs to so few categories either. Some others requiring thorough analysis and action are:

(1) The terrible waste of our gifted children, and the loss through the drop-out route of both gifted and others;

(2) Antiquated state certification requirements which exist in many parts of the country;

(3) Little understanding of preventive discipline and mental health (of both students and teachers).

Part of our work will be accomplished when we recognize that these and many other situations in education are in dire need of study by groups and by many of us individually because we, as individuals, are so responsible for their being with us. However, the major portion of the job will come later, when we set up specific techniques for conducting the "clean-up."

Outstanding materials for your social studies classes

Man's Ways and Times

A new social studies program
for grades 3 through 6

WAYS OF OUR LAND

Clarence Woodrow Sorensen

OLD WAYS AND NEW WAYS

Lewis Paul Todd • Kenneth S. Cooper

NEW WAYS IN THE NEW WORLD

Todd and Cooper

WORLD WAYS

Todd and Cooper

Man in His World

Barrows, Parker, Sorensen
1954 edition

Complete and up-to-date geography.
Grade 4 through junior high school.

OUR BIG WORLD

THE AMERICAN CONTINENTS

OLD WORLD LANDS

A WORLD VIEW

Then and Now in the United States

Eighteen filmstrips, all in color, for
regional studies in geography, history,
and citizenship.

Silver Burdett

45 East 17th St., New York 3, N. Y.
Chicago • Dallas • San Francisco

Copyright © 1954 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.