Teacher Education and Social Change

A student teacher acquires an intense and dynamic purpose when he works long enough with a group to be able to accept its members' problems as his problems and their needs as his responsibility.

Teacher Education, in common with preparation for all other professions, grows out of the knowledge and experience of the past, and projects its product into the long future. Many professional groups now recognize the need for keeping their members up-to-date and abreast of current changes.

But teacher education has an even larger task. In their daily work teachers are affected by and must relate their procedures to change and progress in all fields. In an atomic age change becomes even more rapid, socially as well as technologically. Teachers must be ready at any time to help their students prepare for changes which are occurring and those which will occur in the future. Indeed, in its simplest terms, education itself means bringing about change in individual learners.

Unfortunately, teacher education institutions cannot determine the ways in which their graduates must change, or even guarantee that they will change. To prepare teachers for all the social changes they and their pupils will meet in a lifetime would seem to be an impossible task. A more reasonable objective for the colleges would be to attempt to develop in their students a readiness for change.

Readiness for Social Change

One of the most significant educational concepts, which has been developed and utilized during this century, is that of the readiness of a learner for a particular new learning experience. Readiness as a factor in learning is already being considered and studied at many points in both preservice and in-service teacher education. Reading readiness in young children is perhaps the best known usage of this concept; readiness for teaching has been central in the whole program of providing pre-professional laboratory experiences for the prospective teacher well before student teaching.

The behavior of teachers we have known gives us some clues as to personal characteristics which might help or hinder a person in preparing him to face changes. In developing the following list it has been assumed that persons possessing these qualities to a high degree might have greater readiness to meet and direct changes, while those who lack these characteristics would find it very difficult to cope with either educational or social changes. Thus they are presented as hypothetical factors of critical significance in producing readiness for social change:
1. An understanding of the present as an outgrowth of the past
2. An appreciation of the enriching possibilities of individual differences in contrast to the limitations of imposed uniformity
3. Skill in human relations
4. An acceptance of pupils and adults as they are
5. Skill in the basic techniques of directing the learning of individuals and groups
6. A strong social and professional purpose.

These factors may appear similar to other lists of goals of education and teacher education, but closer study will reveal some differences. Experience suggests that these factors tend to be emotional rather than just intellectual, usually personal rather than purely professional, and the product of social experience rather than the result of academic achievement alone. The reader will find it easy to give additional factors and may wish to modify or eliminate others.

If a college faculty were to accept even this tentative list as one guide in curriculum planning the next question would be, “What educational experiences can a faculty design which might produce these qualities in prospective teachers?” Unfortunately, neither the literature nor our own experience gives us much help at this point. In the following paragraphs the nature of each of these factors is discussed further and some procedures are suggested to stimulate thought and discussion.

Developing Readiness for Social Change

1. An understanding of the present as an outgrowth of the past: Much more is implied here than just the formal study of history and the social sciences. This understanding is also an emotional matter—a feeling for cultures and their differences, a sense of debt to those who struggled for the freedom which we enjoy, an appreciation both of the effect of maturity and decline on a community and of the place of leadership in revitalizing a community or area by leading the people to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.

Building this kind of understanding is the responsibility of those in general education as well as those in professional teacher education. Formal studies must be accompanied by field studies and on-the-spot analyses of the causes and results of social change. Many teacher education students are so provincial that they take their environment for granted. Under the guidance of a socially conscious professor, students can have a thrilling experience, and even sense the growing edge of history moving alongside them.

2. An appreciation of the enriching possibilities of individual differences in contrast to the limitations of imposed uniformity: We in America still feel the narrowing influence of the overemphasis on “Americanization” early in this century, when this country was absorbing an average of a million immigrants a year. Bilingualism became unpopular, and now our lack of it makes us ridiculous in the eyes of the world. Today in our schools we are trying to preserve some of the folklore and customs of other peoples in the realm of art, music, costume and the dance—all of which we tried so hard to destroy a generation or two ago.

Our students come to us with broader backgrounds than was formerly the case.

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but many of them still have lived too sheltered lives. They need periods of residence in other cultures, or temporary employment in another social environment. They need to explore the causes and results of some of our teen-age and adult fads and fashions. Colleges should provide directed study of the effect of environment on personality and of the process by which individual children can be helped in ways which are unique for them because of their individual differences.

3. **Skill in human relations**: Learning to live and work together successfully, democratically and enjoyably with others who are very different from ourselves may be divided into three successive stages or levels of activity. First, it is necessary to strike up an acquaintance. We all tend to dislike or distrust those whom we do not know. Second, we must develop an awareness of the habits, customs, likes, dislikes and attitudes of the other person. Third, we must reach the point of acceptance of him as a friend, neighbor, pupil or colleague as the case may be. As American educators we have many opportunities for travel and teaching assignments overseas, and we must learn that in working with people of other cultures, races and nationalities we must help them do what they want to do, rather than tell them what we think they should do. Many an American has been a “badwill” ambassador abroad because he failed to learn how to use this very important pattern of skills—acquaintance, awareness and acceptance.

Important as these skills are it is amazing how few professional trainees in all fields are provided with a planned program in the study of human relations. Rather than formal studies, students need to participate in a skillfully led group study of human relations accompanied by an ongoing field experience from which they can bring problems for special study.

4. **An acceptance of pupils and adults as they are**: Some of the limitations and problems resulting from the lockstep approach to education become very real to a student who finds that Johnny can’t read second grade books easily, but is in the seventh grade. Students need assignments in several different classrooms to observe, to participate actively as an assistant to the teacher, and to give individual instruction to different children with problems in learning. A prospective teacher is never quite the same again after getting the deep satisfaction which comes from discovering a way to stimulate a pupil to satisfactory achievement, even when the regular teacher may have given up on this youngster. Student teachers approach classroom instruction with much greater insight after extensive experience with individual instruction.

Acceptance of adults as they are seems to grow out of experience with both adults and one’s peers. Students gain much from a variety of work experience, and leadership activities both in community agencies and in peer groups. Also they need to be taught to analyze the behavior of others, especially much older people, to locate the motives, pressures and personal problems which tend to explain individual behavior. This is the secret of true empathy, a great asset for any teacher.

5. **Well developed skill in the basic techniques of directing the learning of individuals and groups**: Many of the most effective techniques of directing learning are actually “learned” patterns, and not intuitive, as suggested by the cliche, “Teachers are born not made.” Indeed some of the simplest techniques with class groups are even contrary to normal
conversational behavior. These are the skills upon which the beginner must rely when he tries to use the "newer" and more complex methods which he has studied in professional courses. The methods textbooks, unfortunately, very largely ignore this order of skills and classroom behavior. Sometimes a young teacher gives up in disgust, saying, "Those were fine theories, but they just don't work." Such a teacher may then become a living example of the saying, "Teachers teach as they were taught and not as they were taught to teach."

Failures such as this are evidence of the lack of readiness for change and the directing of change in the classroom. College faculties are failing their students if they are allowed to start teaching without well developed skills in the instruction, leadership and management of individuals and groups. To provide this background colleges must set up a carefully structured stairstep approach, with a series of experiences of gradually increasing responsibility. Nothing less than a full year's internship after certification will complete the job for most of our beginning teachers, and this is out of the question for a decade or so until we have an adequate supply of teachers.

6. A strong social and professional purpose: People generally believe that members of a profession should be dedicated to serve society and uphold the traditional purposes of their profession. In as large and poorly paid a profession as teaching far too many people teach just for something to do. A dental school professor pointed up the real problem in asking this question, "How does one teach to insure that each graduate dentist has a true social consciousness, a true professional purpose?" The same question poses a real problem for teacher education.

Informal observation of thousands of teacher education students gives support to at least one promising hypothesis. A student seems to acquire an intense and dynamic purpose when he works long enough with a group outside his own face-to-face group to be able to accept its problems as his problems, and its needs as his responsibility. In short, when he reaches a true identification of himself with a group of others who are dependent on him for leadership and direction he acquires intense purposes which seem to have a lasting effect upon the person himself. This result often is obtained more quickly and more readily in informal leadership situations in community agencies and summer camps than in school assignments, where there is a captive audience.

In conclusion it should be emphasized that the above suggestions grow out of the experience of the writer and his colleagues. The proposals are only some professional hunches which must be tested against the experience and judgment of many others. Beyond that they point up very clearly the great need for research in teacher education. Actually we know very little about the development of personality and the effect of the teacher's behavior on children and adults.

We must develop a rationale for research in teacher education, must secure adequate funds from both public and private sources, and bring together personnel from many disciplines to carry on the task. Then when promising hypotheses are identified and refined we must embark upon a broad program of action research. In the meantime teacher educators can have some exciting experiences trying out procedures designed to develop readiness for meeting and directing social change.