



Who Is This Person We Call Teacher?

GEORGE E. DICKSON *
SAMUEL L. CREIGHTON

PERHAPS the easiest and simplest way to answer the question posed in the title would be to consult Webster's dictionary and find that a teacher is defined as one whose occupation is to instruct. This definition is not adequate. The teacher of today is a highly complicated individual, personally and professionally, a fact which makes any simple description literally impossible.

Contemporary teachers come in many sizes, shapes, colors, and from all ethnic and racial groups. They are unique in their political, social, and philosophical makeup due to the broad and diverse backgrounds from which they have evolved and their considerable geographical mobility.

Traditionally, society has expected and set very high and, at times, stringent ideals for teachers to follow. They are expected to be protectors, inspirers, critics, appreciators of excellence, and enemies of shoddiness. They cannot be aloof but they should not be too bold. They must give as well as receive. And most of all, they must be above reproach, indefatigable, dedicated, zealous, and self-controlled.

There are persons within the teaching profession who compare favorably with the

foregoing statements and perhaps with other descriptive terms that characterize a widely held view of the ideal teacher. Some teachers come with much of the zeal, confidence, and dedication that characterized Jesus of Nazareth, Socrates, Booker T. Washington, William Scopes, and many others. On the other hand, there may be found among teachers the indolent, the awkward, the uninterested, the callous, the mercenary, and even the unfit.¹

Today's teachers are better prepared, younger, more independent of mind and spirit, and much more militant than their "timid non-boat rocking" predecessors. Young teachers are dedicated to the ideals of education and initially bring with them into the profession a strong commitment to students, public, and profession. The professionally-minded older teacher continues this commitment. Most teachers believe in the worth and

* George E. Dickson, Dean, College of Education, University of Toledo, Toledo, Ohio; and Samuel L. Creighton, Administrative Intern, College of Education, University of Toledo, Toledo, Ohio

¹ Phillip Freedman and Nathan Kravetz. "The Case of the Disadvantaged Teacher." *School and Society* 96: 204; March 30, 1968.

dignity of man and recognize the importance of the pursuit of knowledge, devotion to excellence, and the nurture of democratic citizenship. Teachers generally recognize the importance, magnitude, and ramifications of the responsibility they have accepted in choosing a career in the field of education.

Militancy

If there is a dominant characteristic that differentiates the contemporary teacher from his predecessor, it has to be militancy. The nonviolent action of the civil rights movement in the South during the 1950's dramatized for the public the way in which civil disobedience might be used to protest the persistence of apparently unjust laws or the reluctance of society as a whole to take positive action to redress social inequities.² The result for teachers has been aptly described in the following quotation:

The teachers are angry and getting angrier by the minute. A decade ago, it was almost unthinkable for them to show the public how they felt by walking out of their classrooms. Between 1956 and 1966, there were a scant 35 strikes. Last school year, however, the number jumped to 100. And in 1968-69, officials . . . expect 300 to 400 work stoppages in every part of the United States.³

Mrs. Elizabeth D. Koontz, president of the National Education Association, has stated succinctly, "We should have spoken out sooner."⁴

The militant characteristic possessed and professed by contemporary teachers is justified. Although the economic factor has been receiving most of the attention in the mass media, this is only one of many factors underlying teacher problems. Teachers see many kinds of laborers with far less educa-

tion being rewarded far beyond them. They know that most men in education, especially those who are married, have to "moonlight" in one, two, and sometimes more extra jobs to support families.

Teachers want to be a real part of a creative enterprise, not silent cogs in the well oiled machine. The old benevolent and paternalistic concept of administration is fading from the scene. Teachers are demanding a policy-making responsibility in regard to salary, conditions of work, teacher load, personnel policies, grievances, promotions, tenure-dismissal, and many other aspects of the educational system and process.

Teachers are frustrated by decrepit buildings, inadequate materials and texts, irritated by the pressures of poverty and segregation, overcrowded classes, and overloaded teaching schedules. They are tired of being society's "stepchild" or "whipping boy" and of being blamed for everything from low achievement scores to a national lack of success in outer space.

The preceding is one view of teachers and teaching. There is another broad picture of the subject which needs projection and which, in many instances, does not square with the generally favorable teacher portrait just expressed. It is the contradiction between these two broad views of teachers which makes it difficult to indicate with clarity who is this person that we call a teacher.

Teachers, broadly speaking, are basically conservative by nature, and the general evidence of their efforts and of the products of their instruction indicates lengthy and deep-seated satisfaction with the status quo. Teachers give the appearance of willingness to react to change in our society by their frequent identification with the subject and considerable discussion about educational innovations, new curricula, and methodology; but when verbal efforts have run their course, surprisingly little accomplishment toward effective educational accommodation of and reaction to change is apparent in schools and classrooms.

Testimony to this situation has appeared

² J. Cass and M. Birnbaum. "What Makes Teachers Militant." *Saturday Review* 51: 55; January 20, 1968.

³ Jack Star. "Our Angry Teachers." *Look* 32: 64; September 3, 1968. By courtesy of the editors. From the September 3, 1968 issue of *Look Magazine*. Copyright © 1968 by Cowles Communications, Inc.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

frequently, but perhaps one quotation from an eminent group of Americans, the Committee for Economic Development, will illustrate the point:

The future of the schools depends in large part on whether they can overcome in educational policy and practice what is frequently an extreme conservatism and a strong resistance to change. This depends in turn on whether they can develop a genuine openness to experiment and innovation.

The schools need variety in the talent and function of their teachers rather than sameness and standardization. They need teachers who are capable of grasping the value of new ideas and are able to move in new directions when the evidence warrants.⁵

Hardening of the educational arteries has claimed many teachers who have even failed to recognize any symptoms of the situation, these symptoms being satisfaction with present instructional patterns, school organization, and instructional staffing and quiet, determined resistance to research findings, mediated instruction and educational technology, and individualized education.

Needed Changes

There is no doubt that many Americans are ready for considerable change in our educational system that is long overdue but that has been very slow in coming. Some changes that are possible and visible at the present moment are as follows:

1. A move away from the mass, large-group approach to teaching and learning to a more highly individualized approach.

2. A much closer identification of a school with its community—the school being an institution in and of the community. There will be some changes in large-city school districts in this process.

3. A less fearful and a more constructive use of the full array of educational technology and media.

4. A shift in the role of the teacher from

⁵ Committee for Economic Development. *Innovation in Education: New Directions for the American School*. New York: Committee for Economic Development, July 1968. p. 14.

that of being a generalist who teaches an entire classroom in many subjects to a teacher who is more of a specialist and who has differentiated roles within a teaching team situation.

5. A greater emphasis on learning how to think and to learn and less concern for assembling and calling forth factual information. More emphasis on the non-cognitive, affective aspects of life and less on the now overstressed cognitive side of learning.

6. A new-found respect for vocational and technical education and a massive effort to upgrade this area of curriculum and its teachers to put them at parity with the older, more traditional subjects and their teachers.

7. A concern for a world, multicultural view of man and society with the concurrent need to develop positive attitudes about people who are different. All children must and will be able to learn in the school of tomorrow. Teachers must develop new skills, new knowledge, and, most important, new attitudes about cultural groups and individuals within these groups.

8. A concern in the educational community for valuing differences rather than for conformity to or maintenance of the present or past. The climate in schools must be stimulating and encouraging, never inhibiting or stifling.

9. Finally, a reliance on the evaluation of performance and behavior to determine whether or not teacher and educational objectives are being met rather than the present over-utilization of tests for factual recall, confidence in subjectively awarded grades, or similar non-useful evaluative techniques. The time has come for systematic evaluation of teachers and programs which will provide prompt and objective feedback to enable personal and program self-correction and improvement.

The question is: Are teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and other educationally related personnel ready, willing, and able to adapt to the above changes? Some undoubtedly are and are trying to do so. However, it is only fair to point out that they do not constitute the majority of teachers in 1969.

Teacher power, which has been discovered and used in the new attitude of teacher militancy, often opposes these changes. The concern of teachers for teacher welfare and

teacher desire for control of most educational decisions are tending in some instances to negate and reduce the roles of school administrators and parents. At the same time, this concern by teachers does not necessarily mean that they are striving to solve educational problems or to meet, constructively, educational change.

Rather, many militant teachers tend to put the meeting of the nine changes occurring in our schools in a second list of priorities to be dealt with at some future time, possibly after personnel needs and power are secured. An effective partnership of teachers, administrators, and parents, rather than the dominance of one group over others, will

be necessary to provide the educational vision and action needed by American society.

The teacher of tomorrow must be a sophisticated organizer, administrator, and stimulator of learning for the complicated and demanding job of teaching. The average individual who is called *teacher* has not yet developed the skills, understandings, and attitudes to be a teacher of this quality. The first priority of the total teaching profession should be to see that opportunities for learning experiences are made available so that he meets the necessary requirements not just to continue as the teacher of today and yesterday, but to become the teacher of the future. □

The ASCD Research Council

presents

THE ECOLOGY OF THE CLASSROOM

theme of the

14th Annual Western Research Institute

"There is a gap between the experimental finds of learning psychologists and typical classroom practices. Some explain this discrepancy by pointing to uninformed teachers. Lately, however, some evidence has indicated that human beings, and indeed all animals, behave differently in experimental situations than they do in their own environment. Perhaps this fact may explain a teacher's diffidence in learning research. An answer to this problem in educational research may be the ecological techniques.

"Ecology as a research procedure may point to new and different implications for teaching, for controlling classroom behavior, and for improving learning climates."

—James Rath
Institute Director

- The Western Institute will consider this provocative new approach to study of the classroom environment.
- Participants will discover the results of ecological research and methodology which provide insight into classroom discipline, interaction, and learning.
- Video tapes designed to help schools initiate new programs will be presented.

April 26-29, 1969 ● Thunderbolt Hotel ● San Francisco, California
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA
1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

Copyright © 1969 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.