



Teacher Corps Interns: A Different Breed

ALFRED A. ARTH*
JENNINGS L. WAGONER, JR.

THE generation coming of age in the 'sixties has already made its mark on history. Whatever the outcome of recent years of activism and militancy, there can be no doubt that the "antiestablishment" temper of our times has affected traditional systems and positions of authority. Even the most revered institutions and personages have been placed on a defensive which requires justification of practice, rather than merely the meager argument of time in operation.

The educational establishment has by no means escaped the criticism of the young. Policies and procedures long taken for granted have been critically examined and many have been found wanting. While many persons have found it convenient to criticize organized education from a distance, a small cadre of young people (less than 2,000) are even now at work in the ghettos and rural areas of the United States. These people, Teacher Corps interns, are as angry, as militant, as critical as any group which has seized larger headlines. Dissatisfied though they are, and distrustful of the educational "establishment" as they most readily admit, these Corpsmen are nonetheless hoping to initiate reform, both in the front lines of teaching and in the teacher preparatory institutions at the rear.

These interns constitute a different breed of educator. Not infrequently disrespectful of authority, resentful of tradition, impatient with compromise, these young teachers appear quite out of place in the education classrooms and teachers' lounges across the nation. Or perhaps we should now say that there once was a time when they would have seemed out of place.

On a recent excursion to Washington for a Teachers Corps conference, we spent several hours discussing educational problems with some

* Alfred A. Arth, Assistant Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; and Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Foundations, University of Virginia, Charlottesville

of these "antieducation" Teachers Corps interns from different sections of the country. Highly vocal, frustrated, hopelessly idealistic, and yet deadly practical, these interns shared with us their anxieties and raised some pointed questions regarding teacher education that are (or should be) of paramount concern to every member of a college or university education faculty, whether the institution is currently engaged in a Teacher Corps program or not.

Many of their questions and "insights" should have a familiar ring to those who can measure their service to the profession in terms of decades instead of months or a year or so, but the points raised lose none of their importance for that. The fact that these questions must still be asked bespeaks as much of establishment rigidity as of the honest naïveté of would-be apprentices of change.

What Relevance?

The interns—and we interviewed a seeming cross-section—have a marked commonality: they all expressed a distinct disgust for educational training at the college level. Regardless of the regions in which they were trained, their comments were strikingly familiar. They echoed the concern "what relevance?" what relevance do these courses have to what is really happening? They seemed especially distressed that *their* classes differed little if any at all from the regular education courses. While most of those with whom we talked acknowledged that special attention was being given to their Teacher Corps curriculum, several strongly objected that "instead of changing the system to meet our needs, we are bent to fit the system."

The interns we interviewed were bitter and vehement in their attack on the "empty" methods courses which they feel plague the teacher training curriculum. It is not that they do not want instruction in "how to teach"; far from it. More than anything they appear to want specific, foolproof techniques for handling the multifarious problems which they face daily in their intern situations. Yet, when faced with the realization that ready formulas have not been found, they tend to react negatively to the generalizations that are in some cases offered. They seem to feel that they hit upon questions that are viewed as sacrilegious in nature, and interpret the absence of a direct answer as a defensive maneuver. A few even expressed to us their satisfaction at having "driven" college professors from the classrooms by a bombardment of unanswerable questions.

Reference to the pedagogy of some education courses was emphasized with sighs of despair. "They want us to pretend to be third graders while someone teaches us a spelling lesson. Come off it, man, how bad can you get?" Jargon, abstract generalities, and lines of social hierarchy which separate professor from student emerged as common complaints. A couple seemed angered and the rest wryly amused that "their" language was not understood in most classes; all were irritated with the "research-type profs" who could speak only in terms of Bloom's *Taxonomy*.

To Make a Difference

Although interns receive certification and a master's degree at the end of two years in the program, few seem to view these rewards as of any consequence. In fact, the interns we interviewed criticized the need

for certification. At least one asserted: "I can teach better than half the teachers in my school—and they are *all* certified." Most agreed that the certification process and the degree structure are barriers to more effective teacher training programs. "If they weren't so hung-up on hours and credits, maybe they could start asking the right questions for a change," one intern complained.

In spite of the underlying philosophy of change and innovation which gave birth to the Teacher Corps, many interns felt that their nonconformist ideas and unorthodox approaches were being sabotaged by the local education authorities. Team leaders, often carefully picked by the administrators because of their loyalty to the local system, were pictured by the interns as hesitant and conservative, as barriers against rather than as supporters of challenge to the system. The interns, seeing themselves as reformers if not revolutionaries, are disillusioned at attempts to "tame" the Teacher Corps program.¹ "They don't want any changes," lamented an intern serving in a Southern state. "How can we make a difference if everyone else in the system fights us every time we try something new?"

These educators questioned and responded to our probes as angered youth. They are angered by the waste produced by the bulky machinery of the educational system. They see needs and feel that solutions could be found *if* the university and local educational personnel were truly committed to "making a difference."

As one after another of these interns related their experiences with disadvantaged youth, it became increasingly evident that they share more than a common hostility to their training programs. Most seem willing to "put up with" what they feel is inadequate preparation for the chance to get into the classroom.

To Interact with Children

They want to interact with children, not as representatives of the Great Society nor as Widow Douglasses out to civilize disadvantaged little Huck Finns, but rather as teachers who would "make to know how." They intuitively sense their main commitment as one of encouraging the ego development of their students. They want the child to understand who he is and to give the child the tools and understandings (not the clichés) necessary for self-determination and self-identification. They hold as foremost the objective that education should enable the child to decide where he wants to fit into society. The present system they condemn as one which leaves the disadvantaged the voiceless victims of a closed society.

Through their commitment and their frustration, these interns, and, it must be added, an increasing number of conventionally trained teachers as well, are fighting for a chance to contribute meaningfully, to make a real difference. If they are denied this, not only the Teachers Corps but the teaching profession itself will sink helplessly into impotency. Adherence to conventional wisdom is folly in the face of unconventional problems. Bureaucratic expediency is tremendously inexpedient when it stifles enthusiasm and imagination and breeds resentment and disillusionment.

¹ See: Bernard C. Watson. "The Taming of a Reform." *Phi Delta Kappan* 50 (2): 99-104; October 1968.

In the final analysis, the most pressing question being asked by these intern-educators is identical with the greatest concern of the young throughout the world in this decade. They are rightly demanding to know if we and our institutions are capable of responding to the challenges of a changing world. Tragically, too many young people who could have made a difference have tired of evasive answers. Accusing those to whom they turned for guidance of copping out, they have in turn tuned out.

Institutions dedicated to teacher preparation, with or without a Teacher Corps program, can ill afford to lose the creative talent and promise of young people who ask for relevance. Far from being anti-education, these men and women—*anxious, dedicated, concerned*—are bringing to the profession a zeal and excitement which has long been muted. To be sure, they do pose a threat to traditional procedures and stereotyped images of education and teachers. And, while their talents are many, their weaknesses are also apparent.

Their extreme value appears to be in the role of questioner. They are asking questions that are seldom discussed in open meetings any more. They are bringing back ghosts that have never ceased to walk but have only been overshadowed by the glare of flashing computer lights and the jumble of chi-square correlations. Their questions and criticisms deserve to be answered with the same honesty and forcefulness with which they are asked. □

Humanizing the Secondary School

By the ASCD Secondary Education Council

NORMAN K. HAMILTON and J. GALEN SAYLOR, editors

Spotlights *humaneness* as the most critical need in American secondary education.

• Deplores the vast gap which exists between thinkers and scholars, on the one hand, and practitioners in the field, on the other hand. • Shows the need to close this gap if secondary schools are to survive the student revolution for relevancy, the teachers' insurrection for professional status and welfare rights, and the social revolution which would take the schools away from professional educators.

Preface by Muriel Crosby,

Papers by Norman K. Hamilton, Thornton B. Monez and Norman L. Bussiere, Herbert A. Thelen, James B. Macdonald, Robert S. Soar, Dwight W. Allen, Lloyd S. Michael, John L. Wallen, and J. Galen Saylor.

Price: \$2.75

Pages: 144

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.