

Authentic Teacher Growth¹

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IT HAS become customary, if not obligatory, in writing a journal piece, to begin by alluding to the rapidity of social change. In deference to convention, therefore, let it be said that the changing social scene has generated powerful implications for teacher professional growth.

For one thing, it has become clear that what we now call in-service education is but a shoddy approximation of what ought to be. The nature of man is such that he tends not to alter that which does not bother him very much, and in-service education has been hardly any bother at all. Thus we have grown accustomed to our preschool institutes, our after-school meetings, and our periodic summer sessions, in the fond belief that good intentions somehow become good deeds. The world, alas, is not so made; there is a vast difference between a gesture and a commitment.

The disappointing consequences of our teacher retraining programs have demonstrated, once again, that a pig's ear cannot be converted into something silken: fourth-rate effort has produced fourth-rate results.

Beyond this, the societal (and hence the educational) winds are shifting rapidly. Whereas school practitioners once were

taught that there is no such thing as the transfer of training, we now recognize that the capacity to use one's knowledge, wisely and prudently, is perhaps the crucial objective of schooling. Drill and rote memorization have given way to an emphasis on conceptual understanding. The computer already promises to store and recall far more about a student's learning habits than do the teacher's memory and record book; multi-media instruction is an improvement on the printed word alone; we seem at last to have acknowledged that five years of school and fifth-grade work are not automatic equivalents, and that children differ in their response to instruction.

Life outside the school similarly is in flux. People on opposite sides of the political and generation gaps have made it increasingly clear that humans are impelled as much by their emotions as by their command of facts; that solving present problems is more important than preserving past traditions; and that the women's liberation movement may soon force us—still another time—to reconstruct the curriculum so as to eliminate inequities. Thus, change—technological, cultural, and political—will necessitate endless teacher renewal in the period ahead.

¹ Points in this article have been adapted from the author's chapter in: Louis J. Rubin, editor. *In-Service Education: New Procedures and Techniques*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1971.

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In view of all this, we need a workable system of teacher professional growth. By analyzing the failures of the past, we can perhaps perceive the essential attributes of such a system:

1. It must have high efficiency.
2. It must deliver the specific knowledge, attitudes, and skills that are the prerequisites of quality teaching.
3. It must fit the actual circumstances of the teacher; teaching in the ghetto school and in the suburban school are of a different order—one teacher may need to understand the *patois* of the black inner city, and the other, the social conventions of the white suburb.
4. It must accommodate—no less than the instruction of children—the uniqueness of the individual. Some teachers know their subject yet lack technical skill. Others are rich in technique but are impelled by irrational values. To treat all teachers alike, ignoring special strengths and weaknesses, is to deny human difference and to defraud the training system of its potential potency.
5. The system must permit the practitioner to function within the constraints of personal style. Teachers vary in manner and personality as well as in craftsmanship. Two teachers, both gifted, do not do the same thing in the same way. Nature may have given one great charisma and the other extraordinary sensitivity to children's feelings. The paths to teaching success are many, for there is no one best way to teach anything.
6. The system must equip the teacher to cope with whatever is of most pressing concern. Pupils ought properly to learn their history, yet there may be times when the problem of an impending drug addiction ought to take priority over the Monroe Doctrine, and times when the Shakespeare ordained by the course of study ought to give way to a student's lost sense of personal identity.
7. The system—to be workable—must respect the way people change.

Human behavior is predictable. Each act has its reason. Our impulses are a complex union of our attitudes and beliefs, our values and our sense of identity. Yet none of these is immutable. A dedicated teacher, disheartened by an uncooperative administration, may grow indifferent while a lethargic teacher, inspired by the sudden realization that he *can* make a difference in the lives of his students, may become passionately interested in his work. Reward and punishment are powerful forces and they can indeed be used to control human action. Behavioral modification, therefore, works. Thus, if we wish, we can influence teachers in the same spirit as we tame lions and train monkeys. But what then do we do to the human psyche?

Authentic growth is a matter of self-evolution because, when all is said and done, each of us is responsible only to himself. We may be tight or loose, authoritarian or permissive, rational or irrational, but in each instance we choose our behavior for ourselves. Since this is so, we cannot evolve or mature if we continue to make choices which bind us to our old ways. In short, the teacher who cannot bear the risk of something new will choose the security of something old.

Experience which increases our awareness, enlarges our insight, extends our sense of options, and diminishes the anxiety of transition is at the heart of real change. It is such experience, alone, which enables a person to become something better. Since we are responsible to ourselves, and since—when external rewards and punishments are stripped away—we choose whatever it is we most value, each man must necessarily direct his own growth. There is hence a pattern: there must be desire, insight, persistence, a willingness to tolerate the stresses and tensions of conversion, and a relentless faith in the worth of the goal.

One may choose to change, as in self-evolution, or one may be manipulated into change, as in a program of behavioral modification. The methodology is similar: new ways of behaving must be initiated, old ways must be eliminated, and slippage—the tendency to fall back—must be countered. There is nonetheless a difference: in one instance, the

person controls the system and, in the other, the system controls the person.

Unlearning and Learning

For four years now, at the University of California at Santa Barbara and at Nova University in Florida, we have been operating experimental programs in teacher in-service education. Much can be learned in four years, partly the hard way and partly through the blessings of serendipity. One learns, after alternating successes and failures, that a teacher is the best educator of other teachers. It is not that principals and supervisors misunderstand the fine points of teaching; rather, it is that their energies can better be used elsewhere—perhaps in the training of trainers—and that the empathy, so crucial to the training role, normally is stronger between two teachers than between a teacher and an administrator.

One learns, also, that massive amounts of professional growth can occur while the teacher is at work. Some kinds of things,

admittedly, must be pursued while the teacher is away from his class. In the main, however, the skills of teaching, like the skills of ping-pong, surgery, and sauce-making, are best acquired through practice. Moreover, it is possible to so arrange the teacher's workday that—given training materials, method, and incentive—skills can indeed be enhanced during the act of teaching. One need not, after all, cook the same bad omelet day after day for years on end; one can learn to do better.

One recognizes, too, that while good training programs are essential, the need for a human coach is indispensable; that a successful method will work for some but not for all teachers; and that in-service education involves unlearning as well as learning. Above all, one discovers that we must aim not for isolated skills, attitudes, or knowledge, but for a complete teacher. Teaching skill can be spent on the wrong objective, knowledge can be set forth clumsily, and when the wrong attitudes prevail, nothing is of much worth. Children need the best we can give. □

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By IRA J. GORDON

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56 Pages

NEA Stock Number: 611-17842

\$2.00

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

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