IN DECEMBER 1971 Governor Ronald Reagan signed a little publicized piece of legislation. It stated:

It is the intent of the Legislature that members of the faculty of the California State Colleges engaged in teacher education be permitted to periodically participate in classroom teaching in the public schools without loss of compensation or other benefits and that classroom teachers be permitted to assist in teacher training at the California State Colleges without loss of compensation or other benefits.

California Education Code, Articles 34500-34503 provided the ground rules for the implementation of these possible teacher exchanges.

In the spring of 1973, I had just completed seven years of university level teaching since last teaching in the elementary schools. Feeling that the observation of student teachers and methods students in elementary school classrooms really was not the same as actually working as a teacher with the children, I resolved to attempt to swap with an elementary school teacher to experience the realities of the elementary school again. Several months worth of red tape later, the swap was arranged. My work as teacher of a fifth grade class in the Orange, California, Unified School District began in September 1973.

Although a Title One school had been requested, Riverdale School, where the teaching was done, was not classified as such in 1973-74. Riverdale was scheduled to receive funding as a Title One school in 1974-75.

The children included in the school attendance area, located in a suburban setting, came chiefly from two economic groups. There were approximately 80 relatively new Federal Housing and Urban Development supported homes housing about 600 children many of whom attended Riverdale. Other children living in recently built middle in-
come homes provided the rest of the more than 600 children in the school. Ethnically the school was over 90 percent "Anglo."

Twenty-eight children were in my fifth grade homeroom, one of the three fifth grade classes in the school. As the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades were departmentalized for instructional purposes, the children in this homeroom class were with me for only part of the school day although they spent more time in the homeroom than anywhere else. The other two fifth grade classes each came to me for 40 minutes of language arts in the morning and 35 minutes of music or art in the afternoon.

On the whole, my homeroom class was slightly superior to the other two classes, both academically and behaviorally. They tested out on standardized achievement tests at slightly below grade level as a group with one of the other classes averaging one tenth and the other two tenths of a grade level lower. The homeroom class had no serious and persistent behavior problems while in one of the other classes almost half the students had self-control problems, and in the third class six children had behavioral difficulties (consensus of the three teachers involved).

Over the years, while observing student teachers in schools using the departmentalized instructional plan, I was aware that student teachers often had class control problems as their pupils came to their room for a certain subject and then went elsewhere. I also noticed that the repetition of lessons with several groups sometimes made student teachers more effective in teaching the later groups. Student teachers sometimes indicated boredom as a result of repeating the lesson several times even when they provided somewhat varying learning activities for the different groups. Being able to teach the subject one really enjoyed teaching and not having to make as many individual preparations were advantages for the student teachers.

Discoveries in the Classroom

Experience in actually teaching in a departmentalized situation led to these further discoveries:

1. Not all teachers were able to teach in those areas in which they felt very interested and had their greatest teaching strengths. This led to some unhappiness with teaching assignments.

2. It was possible to devote much more planning time to the preparation of lessons and instructional materials in the few subject areas one was responsible for. However, the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers at Riverdale School spent less total preschool and after school time on planning than they would have if they had been teaching in a self-contained classroom.

3. Children at the fifth grade level seem to need more security than appears possible when they make as many classroom shifts as these children made. They probably would have been more secure if they had been dealing with one teacher in one familiar room environment.
4. Class control probably would have been better if the students had been responsible to one teacher. Three differing teacher behavior expectation patterns doubtless were confusing to many of the children. It also was more difficult to enforce expected behaviors when this became necessary.

5. Learning experiences were controlled by the clock, often to the detriment of learning. Lessons often were not completed in class time and assigning the remainder as “homework” often was not effective. It would have been better if the teacher had been able to have children complete the various learning tasks before going on to the next even if all the subjects scheduled for the day were not completed.

6. It was difficult for the teacher to know the needs of individual children when the teacher encountered 85 children each day.

7. It was quite difficult to respond effectively to the needs of individual children. The self-contained classroom situation would have provided much more flexibility in this respect.

8. Planning for a self-contained class probably would have taken more time than did planning in a departmentalized setting.

9. The teacher really did not know what the other two fifth grade teachers were doing.

10. Little correlation of learnings occurred. A teacher in a self-contained class could have associated the science with the social studies, the language arts with the art activity, etc., so that the child’s learnings would have been less compartmentalized and more lifelike in cutting across subject matter lines.

11. Parents had considerable difficulty in communicating with three separate teachers. During the formal mid-semester report card conferencing time, parents were allotted 20 minutes to talk with three teachers. This did not provide much time to consult on how to help those children having major difficulties in school. Because little communication with the home appeared to take place outside this formal conferencing time, one teacher’s communicating directly with the child’s parents would have resulted in more effective assistance for the child.

12. Based upon my experiences, the teacher enjoys the self-contained classroom more than the departmentalized one. He or she gets to know the children better, establishes better rapport with them, helps them more effectively, and enjoys them more.

Two major justifications for the departmentalized structure have been given: (a) that the teacher may teach in his or her special interest field possibly resulting in an improved learning situation and (b) that less planning time is needed. In my opinion, these benefits probably cannot compensate for the negative results stemming from departmentalization.

My 14 previous years of experience in teaching in elementary schools proved to be very useful, since much of what was to be taught was familiar to me. So were many of the activities in which the children were engaged. It seemed to be a very natural thing to be teaching a fifth grade class. However, there were many new learning experiences which at times followed one after the other with amazing rapidity.

Changes in the Children

My observations led me to believe that probably one of the greatest recent major changes in the schools seems to have occurred in the children. My last seven years of public school teaching prior to entering the university post took place in the Burbank, California, schools. Those children had been members of families with lower incomes and living in physically poorer home
environments than the children in Riverdale School. Nevertheless, the Burbank children had seemed to be happier, more contented, and more secure than the Riverdale School children. I seemed to sense a lack of direction, a rootlessness, a malaise in the Riverdale children. They seemed to lack goals, an objective in being, a drive toward even the immediate future.

This showed up in different ways. Many of the children did not regard assignments as things to be completed, particularly completed on time. Both the "work type" assignments such as those in math and reading and the more pleasureful arts, crafts, or free reading tasks frequently were not completed as they should have been.

Many of the children also seemed to be indifferent toward controlling their own actions in class. They needed to be reminded of what was acceptable behavior more often than the children I had worked with seven years previously. And when punishment was necessary for repeated unacceptable behavior, students appeared to be more surprised that they were being punished and more resentful when they were denied privileges because of misbehavior.

In casual conversations with the children, discussions of their future plans also usually drew a blank. There was a strong tendency not to have thought about it or to indicate that they would get a job in a factory, gasoline station, office, or store. Few of the children seemed to be college bound or to be heading toward a professional future.

There was little concern for school-supplied books and paper. Many of the expendable spelling books lost their covers quite rapidly. Hardback books fared somewhat better although they were written on by many children and they were handled very carelessly, for example, dropped on the floor, left/lost in the other rooms as the children made their rounds, or left at home when needed at school.

An outside observer coming into the classroom would have seen an apparently well conducted class in operation. The children usually were quietly and purposefully working at various tasks at their desks or in different parts of the room. The teacher was well prepared and usually was working with the whole class, small groups, or individuals. The room environment was good with interesting bulletin boards, child made materials, a class library, and learning centers in appropriate places. In fact, the principal frequently brought visitors to the room because it looked like it was a good fifth grade situation—and yet to me, something did not feel quite the way it should have. Perhaps this was the result of the unsettledness of our times, the lack of a common value structure, the rapid flux and changing of our culture. Perhaps this was rubbing off on the children and the teacher, which resulted in my feelings about what happened in Riverdale's Room 32.

The first half of the semester up through the time for parent conferences was the honeymoon part of the semester. During these nine weeks it was fascinating to be reminded of what I already knew about elementary schools and fifth grade materials and children, to be learning new things, and to feel the sheer pleasure of working with the very lovable children in all three classes.

During the second half of the semester this learning continued at a slower rate, the children were just as lovable, but another factor entered the situation. I progressively became more and more tired. I had forgotten how very exhausting elementary school teaching can be and I had to experience it again to really appreciate how hard elementary school teachers work when they conscientiously try to do the best job they can do.

This report is not complete without some observations on the professional staff at Riverdale School. Almost without exception these teachers appeared to be better educated than my last co-workers in Burbank had been. They were better prepared professionally. They functioned more as professionals as they worked together and, most important, they were concerned about their children as individuals. They genuinely wanted to help their students in any way they could. It was a pleasure to have known them and to have worked with them for the semester we worked together.
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