

# School of Education: Friend or Foe?

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**A**T THE moment—and in some places—the School of Education is considered *foe*. And, if the current accountability/behavioral objectives trend continues, it will be regarded in the adversarial role currently held by administration. Throughout the sixties the deluge of criticism about what was wrong with the public schools fell, for the most part, on teachers. This, I believe, was and is quite unfair. I work with and observe thousands of teachers every year and they are indeed doing precisely and well what they were trained to do. The trouble is that what they were trained to do has little if anything to do with children and education, and is so far removed from the realities of living with children five days a week—and their real needs—as to be mostly useless. Of course, there are exceptions.

Every school of education, including my own, believes it is the exception. Yet, for the most part, it is not, for essentially we all do the same thing. Teachers are not treated as professionals in most meanings of the word. They do not set hours, working conditions, or fees. They are straight-out wage earners and now, due to our influence, are increasingly fulfilling the role of production

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*Teachers of teachers are generally too far removed from the realities of the public school classrooms. An alternative to such remoteness is suggested by this writer.*

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workers, that is, they are responsible for turning out a product, *supposedly*, with quality control.

The makeup of schools of education does not bear up well under realistic and critical scrutiny. We have low rank on the academic status hierarchy and mostly it is deserved. We are generally in competition with physical education for having the most boring, mistaught, irrelevant, and superficial courses and instructors. It is embarrassing, to say the least, that those who profess to know the most about how to teach should be considered to be the poorest teachers. Such low status "respectability" is erroneously perceived to have something to do with term papers, "hard tests," much time and hard work (that is, the Puritan work ethic), and selecting safe, high-grade-average grinds for students.

The difference between classes of edu-

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cation majors and classes of liberal arts majors is often startling—and depressing. We are faced with these quiet, very “nice” people, notebooks open, properly humble, ready to do and say whatever we ask. They are—as if stamped out of the same mold—uniformly “nice,” quiet, quite boring, with all excitement, creativity, and individuality efficiently first selected and then programmed out of them. Such students are indeed ready for work in our public schools. The “different” few who manage to survive for a time are quickly broken or eliminated by the final student teaching ordeal.

### How Did We Get This Way?

The question is obvious: how did we get this way, come to this state? Our condition is no secret and our reputation is generally well known. Many returning graduate students—practicing teachers—make no pretense. They are back not to learn anything but because they need the credits for more money or permanent certification. We got this way because we tend to attract and provide safe haven for large numbers of the mediocre, possibly those who have failed in their first choice.

We have in my own field, philosophy of education, mostly those not at all interested in the schools but in philosophy per se. The

Philosophy of Education Society is dominated by those interested in linguistic analysis, a school of philosophy which generally attempts to make the meaning of language precise. Linguistic analysis may have some indirect importance for education but it is mostly useless and meaningless for practicing teachers, who need to know what the school is all about and what they are doing as part of the institution and *why* they are doing it. But we tend to get the leftover failures from philosophy and psychology, and immense numbers of those who either did not do well in the public school classroom or hated every minute of it and never want to return—and don’t—as soon as they get into the school of education. There are exceptions, of course, but they are few.

We have one of the few academic areas in which one does not have to be successful in the field in order to teach. Imagine preparing trial lawyers if one has never been a practicing, successful trial lawyer, or teaching surgery if one has never performed an operation. Not only do we have professors of education who have never taught, but even if they have their experience was years back. Given the rate of change in our society, that means that they are so hopelessly out of touch with the contemporary child that they are more than useless—they are dangerous in their misinformation.



Successful teachers cannot become professors of education until they have a Ph.D. A Ph.D. is almost useless in our field, that is, for those who train teachers. While some research and scholarship are helpful, our main responsibility is not in writing term papers for each other. This is, once again, the "respectability" syndrome functioning. Rather our responsibilities are involved in a sharing process, a supportive role, helping teachers gain confidence, and reminding them of what they are there to do, that is, of their objectives and goals, pointing out to them that they are working with, and responsible for, individual human development. We are there to act as a resource for ideas and materials for their own development and growth from our wider perspective and experience. The most successful practicing teachers and administrators should be selected for the faculties of schools of education. In England they are but certainly not here. We have instead large numbers of book-learned "scholars" who seldom if ever set foot in a public school in order to understand what teachers live with daily.

### Removal from Reality

This removal from the reality of our contemporary schools is deadly. It means that these supposed experts are working in isolation reinforcing one another. It then becomes clear as to how such an aberration as the setting up of behavioral objectives can come about. Anyone who lives and works with children in a school setting knows full well how ludicrous the whole business is. Certainly we can force teachers to write behavioral objectives, as they have always done with lesson plans, and even give us a charade/demonstration that these objectives are achieved. But teachers know better. They are experts at faking out the administration, and now us. Both behavioral objectives and their natural outcome in the accountability fad are being imposed on teachers by schools of education (but, of course, this same control is not imposed on the schools of education themselves). This places us not in a supportive, non-critical, resource role, but with

administration in a control/adversary role. The resentment and suspicion are evident in our courses as teachers continue the charade and ritual of their work day with us. Teachers are indeed resourceful. They will put us on as well as they do administration.

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If education professors were part, as they should be, of the daily lives of teachers in our schools, they would perhaps stop asking how can we teach better and more efficiently and raise achievement scores, and instead begin to ask the really crucial questions. Is what we are teaching important, worth knowing, or is it mindless routine? How long is it known? Is it really understood? Does it have any real effect upon the student, for life? Is all this math really necessary? Is the high school curriculum merely a front for social programming? *Why* are we doing this or that? What does all this testing prove and for what purpose? Why is it that no matter how seemingly scientific, super-organized, and control oriented we become, classroom operation does not seem to change very much? Does it make sense to have all children of certain ages, 5, 10, or 15, together in a grade level? What do marks have to do with education?

Rather, the schools of education reinforce the status quo. Interestingly enough they will often blame administration for the rigidity of our schools. Interestingly because they also train the administrators. The message we send to the classroom teachers is clear: we in the school of education do not trust you, even after our training of you. You must be controlled, made to state what

you are doing in the most precise terms, that is, you must teach minute modules, bits of information, lessons, and *measure these for our evaluation*. Otherwise no learning has taken place. We are in a league with your administration, in control and evaluation, monitoring everything you do. *You* will be held accountable, by tests which *we* devise, for the *measured* progress of 30-40 students, with myriad abilities, talents, learning styles, personal problems, and propensities (all of which we explained to you in our courses and now blatantly contradict). Then we wonder why teachers view us with suspicion and mistrust.

### **This Can Be the Alternative**

An alternative? Schools of education need a faculty drawn, full or part-time, from the best practicing teachers and administrators, those with proved success *with* children, and supported by many practicing, skilled people in business, government, arts, and industry. We need teams of professors assigned to a small manageable group of beginning education majors throughout three full undergraduate years interned in schools from the start with their professors so that a long and close working relationship in school settings is developed and thus true evaluation becomes possible. This supportive relationship should continue after graduation if possible. The teacher should be given support and commitment by his/her mentors, freedom to experiment and freedom to make mistakes, and still know that support is there, by people experienced and still practicing in the profession. Medical doctors are prepared in this way and lawyers used to be. Tied in would be, of course, full, continuing, in-service programs given in the school by these teams with the teachers in their classrooms, in real situations with children. This is all common practice in England where the results are impressive. North Dakota and Lillian Weber's program in New York City also utilize variations of this approach.

I think we can imagine the very real threat this poses for many of the faculty of our schools of education, especially those

who came there seeking protection. In essence, what I am suggesting for the university/school of education is what I and some others do, as individuals—a working, co-equal, supportive, in-the-classroom relationship with teachers, non-critical, non-control, sharing problems and responsibilities. There is a distinct difference for the classroom teacher when the outsider comes in and *works with the children and teacher*. It is the difference between helper/resource and critic/controller. One shares the problems while the other creates or compounds them. At the moment our universities are not in this supportive position nor are they even tending in this direction. Rather they are becoming, or already are, the enemy, the adversary. Teachers view them in this role and so will do what subordinates always do, find means of out-maneuvering them and telling them what they want to hear. This will not make for quality education or help children develop intellectually or emotionally.

We must remind ourselves that all of us, professors, administrators, and teachers have one overall priority—children, their potential and the development of that potential. Our priorities are not behavioral objectives, grades, test scores, looking good, or even efficiency, if we are efficient at the expense of the child. We must also remind ourselves that in this commitment the classroom teacher is the most important element and that nowhere, in any field, is quality achieved by absolute control, fear, or constant criticism and checking up.

Teachers—and students—given responsibility, freedom, and support, become what they have the potential to be. We all know that in our own lives. No one anywhere takes criticism well or welcomes it. Under such a system individuals become instead people who do the minimum expected, to get by, to get others—*us*—off their backs. The openness we should be looking for in both teachers and students is the trust expressed in: "I have a problem. Will you help me?" Then we have some indication that we are needed, trusted, and may become a necessary part of the educational process and the continuing growth of the teacher. □

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