

The Way I See It

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LET'S NOT FOOL PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS

We must resist the omnipresent tendency in our profession to glamorize teaching out of proportion and to recruit even the undecided and semi-committed to the profession.

—Barbara Day, ASCD President 1980-81

The educational community is failing to meet one of its major responsibilities, bringing new practitioners into the profession with their eyes open. Prospective teachers need to know that pressure is great, just as the money is not. Teaching is a high stress occupation and the lowest paid of all professions surveyed by the College Placement Council in 1980. I've seen firsthand the psychological effects of the resentment that builds inside a teacher at the injustice of such a financial reward system.

The American public demands quality teaching, places blame on schools and teachers for many of society's ills, and pays beginning teachers grocery clerk's wages. Yet public opinion makers, including educators, have sold education as an attractive profession based on its intangible rewards. These public leaders have created a "myth of fulfillment" that has enticed unsuspecting, unqualified college students into teaching. These myths, which most of you will recognize, include: teaching is an art, not a science; teaching is a good profession for women because they can be home with the children in the summer; those who can, do—those who can't, teach; you don't have to be bright to teach, only dedicated.

The generalities I've heard from student teachers are equally bad. "I love working with kids"—this from an overweight young woman who would soon afterwards burst into tears when a sweet little second-

grader called her "fatty, fatty two-by-four." What she had not been told in any of her preparation was that the cruelty that plagued her childhood still awaited her in the schools. Her obesity and its attendant image problem were not destined to be solved by a class full of loving second-graders and she should have been told that long before her first year of teaching.

I laugh to myself every time I hear a student teacher fantasize "Kids are so stimulating!" or "The subject excites me." When faced with kids whose idea of stimulating is a tack on the teacher's chair, teachers begin to realize that teaching is a hard, demanding, on-your-toes-all-the-time job differing from a nuclear reactor operator's only in that "critical incidents" in education are everyday occurrences. My love of the English language never stimulated anyone; it was two hours of careful planning and a strong teaching job.

One of the really trying times is the day the young teacher realizes that he or she will always have to struggle mightily to get elementary concepts across to students and never get to the really exciting ideas with most of them. It is not easy for a talented young scientist to give up the challenge of scientific discovery and devote oneself instead to learning the science of communicating that knowledge.

I cringed recently when a budding poetess told me she longed to teach because children have such "fresh insights." In 15 years of reading student essays I've read virtually every "original, fresh insight" ten times and must constantly remember that to the writer it is not hackneyed. The number of fresh new insights I've gained from student writing in that time have enlivened damned few of my days. I've learned instead that my great

joys must come from the glow inside a student discovering what I've known for years.

Some of the unhappiest people I know tell me the things they like best about teaching are June, July, and August. Young believers will surely spend 40 unhappy weeks every year waiting for 12 happy ones only to find they can't afford a summer vacation and must find a supplemental job; can't find a job and spend the summer unemployed, bored, and unable to do anything about it because they're broke; or must go to summer school for eight weeks.

What kind of teacher candidates do I want then? I want newly trained teachers to come into the profession knowing what is needed and demanded of them. I want them selected and weeded out; I want those with talent recruited. We practicing teachers, administrators, and professors should take advantage of our positions to entice and encourage students with teaching potential to join us, and to discourage those who should not teach. We need to counsel talented neophytes to develop the skills of teaching as well as knowledge of subject matter. We need to ensure many laboratory experiences for potential teachers, critically evaluate them, and make them the basis of further instruction and for counseling into and out of the profession.

We need teachers who answer the interview question, "Why did you decide to be a teacher?" with statements such as, "My education instructors have told me I have highly developed communications and conceptualization skills. I am high in empathy. I have a strong background in my subject matter. I've enjoyed success in my various practicums. I believe in the vital importance of education and I believe I have a contribution to make." ■

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