The Way I See It

By SHIRLEY C. RAINEES

At a recent state convention, a group of teachers invited me to come to their school district to make a presentation on beginning reading. They wanted me to speak to their administrators because they were afraid to question central office mandates about reading instruction. They told me a teacher who had questioned the district’s approach was later assigned to a different teaching position for which she was not certified. They felt pressure to accept without question whatever the administration directed.

During the lunch break at a recent in-service meeting, the principal recalled a particularly disturbing faculty meeting. After several teachers had talked with him about needed changes in the remedial program, he put the topic on the faculty meeting agenda. He made a stirring appeal for serious examination of the issues, but no one responded. Later, an experienced teacher cautioned him that the last principal was an agitator too and he didn’t last long. In these days of declining enrollment, the open discussion of controversial issues is too great a risk.

After a stimulating debate about the reliability of standardized test results for young children, a teacher said to me, “Will you help me? I’ll set up a meeting and I’m sure when they hear you say these things, they’ll understand why I don’t like making decisions in March for children’s placement in September based on those scores.” When I talked with her, I found that she had never discussed her concerns with the administration. She was a non-tenured teacher and she was afraid even to raise the issue.

Prospective teachers in their final semester of student teaching have similar concerns. In a probing evaluation session, students confided to me that they were so concerned about finding a job that they simply went along with whatever satisfied the principal and cooperating teacher in order to get a good recommendation. A questioner was viewed as a trouble-maker.

I wonder how prospective and practicing teachers who dare not question can effectively fulfill the purposes of the educational process, which include cultivating thinking by questioning, investigating, probing, and decision making. I doubt if teachers can instill in children the exhilaration of seeking answers when they feel so thwarted in dealing with issues that are paramount to them as professionals.

Several years ago, I observed one of the best young teachers I have ever seen. Later I learned she changed from public to private school and then left the profession. When I saw her recently I asked her why she quit when she was so good at her job, so successful with teaching children. She said, “You know, these days you either do it their way—with their books, their materials, their methods—or you suffer. It doesn’t matter how successful I was teaching my way. Everybody has to be on the same program—their program.”

In this era of accountability, many well-meaning educators have adopted one-answer programs requiring teachers who vary widely in their levels of resourcefulness, organizational abilities, and sensitivity to children’s needs, to teach as if they were all alike. Accountability for children to make progress has been exchanged for commitment to a program. When students fail, the program is seldom blamed, but when students succeed, the program receives the credit, not individual teachers. Indeed, some teachers who through the years have been highly successful are being asked to abandon established practices and teach the “program” just like the teacher next door who is the worst teacher in the school. Mass changes in direction for all teachers, regardless of success, are made because of a few incompetents. And teachers—uneasy about faculty reductions, legislative edicts, and tenure recommendations—remain silent.

Some administrators may prefer it that way, but most of them probably have no intention of squelching dissent. However, in their zeal to get higher test scores or achieve some other goal, they may issue mandates, intimidate teachers, and smother thoughtful discussion that could lead to better solutions. If they do not intend to threaten teachers, administrators must make clear their respect for professional integrity by encouraging those who dare to question.

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