

The Master Teacher's Greatest Reward

Given the opportunity to pursue academic learning again, teachers return to the classroom with renewed enthusiasm.

Recent reports on the state of primary and secondary schooling have focused principally on the problems of schools. What should be celebrated more than it has been is teachers' desire to learn.

For two years, I have helped evaluate two continuing projects of the Council for Basic Education, a non-profit membership association in Washington, D.C., which since 1956 has promoted the teaching of the liberal arts in the schools. One of these projects has been a fellowship program for independent summer study in the humanities. In the summers of 1983, 1984, and 1985, roughly 375 high school teachers throughout the country received \$3,000 to free them for two months of self-directed reading in the humanities. Working on their own, they studied everything from American Indian myths to Irish history. More important, they were responsible only to themselves, obliged only to study on their own. They were prohibited from writing curriculum, learning administrative skills, or studying educational psychology. They were paid to learn.

The second Council program has cosponsored summer institutes in

mathematics and science for teachers of these subjects in middle and high schools. In the summers of 1984 and 1985, ten urban school districts and the faculty of as many neighboring colleges and universities united to assist roughly 1,050 teachers to study math and science in academic settings and in ways fresh to their recent experience.

Both programs seek to reinvigorate teachers' knowledge and skills in a field of learning. Both require risk, dedication, and hard work. Above all, both treat teachers as professionals in a learned calling. Their governing principle is that true professionals know their subject well, pursue it avidly, are held accountable for knowing it, and gain rewards for mastering it.

Fired Up to Teach

The news that should get out—because so often we hear otherwise—is that teachers want and seek knowledge and jump at the chance to get it. The Council's humanities fellows spoke of their "gratitude" and "excitement" at being supported to read Aquinas, study American foreign policy, or examine English novels. One wished the summer "to go on forev-

er," and another said that "it was one of the most remarkable and satisfying summers in my life." They were, in their own words, "replenished," "renewed," "fired up to teach again" by the chance to learn free of requirements and lesson plans.

Though often nervous about their ability to work alone, often longing for the security of syllabi and seminars, these temporarily independent scholars were nevertheless proud to have been given the chance to study and learn as trusted adults, free to carry out a professional task without oversight and rigid accountability, and, like academic professors on research leave, to be paid to do so. The most striking result of the fellowships was a newfound humility. One teacher reported, "I found out how little I knew." said another, "I have begun taking myself seriously as a student rather than a teacher."

Many teachers had sacrificed better-paying jobs for the chance to learn again. Though finding the experience "traumatic," "shocked" at the demands of intensive work, "appalled at what they didn't know," they reported being "charged up by new confidence." Having overcome their own

anxiety about the subject, said one, "We pass on our greater comfort with the subject as a comfort to the kids." Why this fresh confidence? Because "the text was put aside," because "we learned to approach not just the problem at hand but all problems." Many exulted in measuring up to "a lot more demanding" college-level standards, one stressed, than any previous requirements in the subject.

These teachers also found being a student again strangely humbling and therefore liberating. They discovered

the value of learning as their own students learn: through required, repeated, intensive practice in solving the very mathematics and science problems encountered in class each day, through discussions with others more expert than they. "Being put in the position of students," one observed, "gave me a much better idea of what kids feel like." Another said they learned to rid themselves of the "security blanket" of the text. What they experienced was the thrill of gaining confidence to spring free on their

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own, a feeling they now hoped to pass on to their students.

But Not Without Obstacles

These reported "conversions," this vital excitement, lend much support to those who argue that teachers, like students, are shortchanged when they are not encouraged, provided incentives, and led to venture forth in search of new knowledge. Yet there is no blinking at the obstacles teachers face, the difficulties they must overcome. Their passion to learn confronts real deficiencies in their own knowledge and abilities. Some teachers are hostile to the thought that some knowledge is knowledge for its own sake that may not immediately and apparently apply to classroom work. "Why do I have to learn this?" they ask, echoing their students.

Yet of all the frustrations these teachers experience, none is so great as the need for professional recogni-

tion and treatment. Teachers are often not regarded as, and thus do not consider themselves to be, professionals. Nothing is more damaging to schools or students.

Much of the problem originates with others. Senior school officials often do not and will not heed teachers' own views of what they should learn or what they most need. Teachers are often compensated only after they have completed every detail of an assignment, in the cynical belief that they will not complete a professional job without threat of denial. Yet most schools from which our summer study teachers came had made no plans to use the teachers as inservice instructors. Their renewed skills and knowledge were quickly to become resources unused and unrecognized. Knowledge gained was to remain knowledge isolated. No wonder that, their appetite for learning and recognition unappeased, teachers' frustra-

tions so often yield to demoralization and cynicism.

Schools reward everything but teachers' knowledge of their own subjects. They provide incentives for everything but learning and expect of their students what they do not encourage in their teachers—the pursuit of ideas. The result is that teachers are lost to the schools in spirit before they are lost to the schools in fact.

If we would improve our schools, we will have to do more than increase teachers' pay, improve working conditions, and toughen their exams. We will have to let them do what so many wish to do, what they wish their students to do, and what they readily can do if given the chance—to quicken their minds, to learn again. □

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