

# Good Teachers In Good Schools: Some Reflections

Artful teaching requires attending to the professional growth of experienced as well as neophyte teachers and moving beyond order and competence.

As site visitors for the United States Department of Education-sponsored Secondary Schools Recognition Program (1983-1985), we spent two days each in ten junior-middle schools and nine senior high schools during the spring of 1985.

The schools had successfully passed earlier local and state reviews of outstanding junior and senior high schools. They are safe, positive places for students; there is order in the buildings. The adults, who are generally well prepared to teach, like young people. Parents and community members support the schools, and the students, despite an occasional complaint, appear happy. It would be difficult for them, after several years in any of these schools, not to emerge more knowledgeable, better skilled, and more enlightened. These are good schools.

Teachers in these schools work hard. In the building a half to three quarters of an hour before and after school, they sponsor clubs and activities, collect money, call parents, and coach teams. They patrol halls, lunchrooms, and bathrooms. We saw them helping students with class projects, getting them started on homework assignments, talking about their personal problems, and leading them to understand complex academic problems.

In out-of-class conversations with students, teachers' friendly, informed exchanges are characterized by interest and concern. Their teaching, however competent, rarely reaches an artistic level.

## The Art and Craft of Teaching

What is the art of teaching? Joseph Axelrod's insights about artful university teaching have broad applicability. He contends that much teaching is

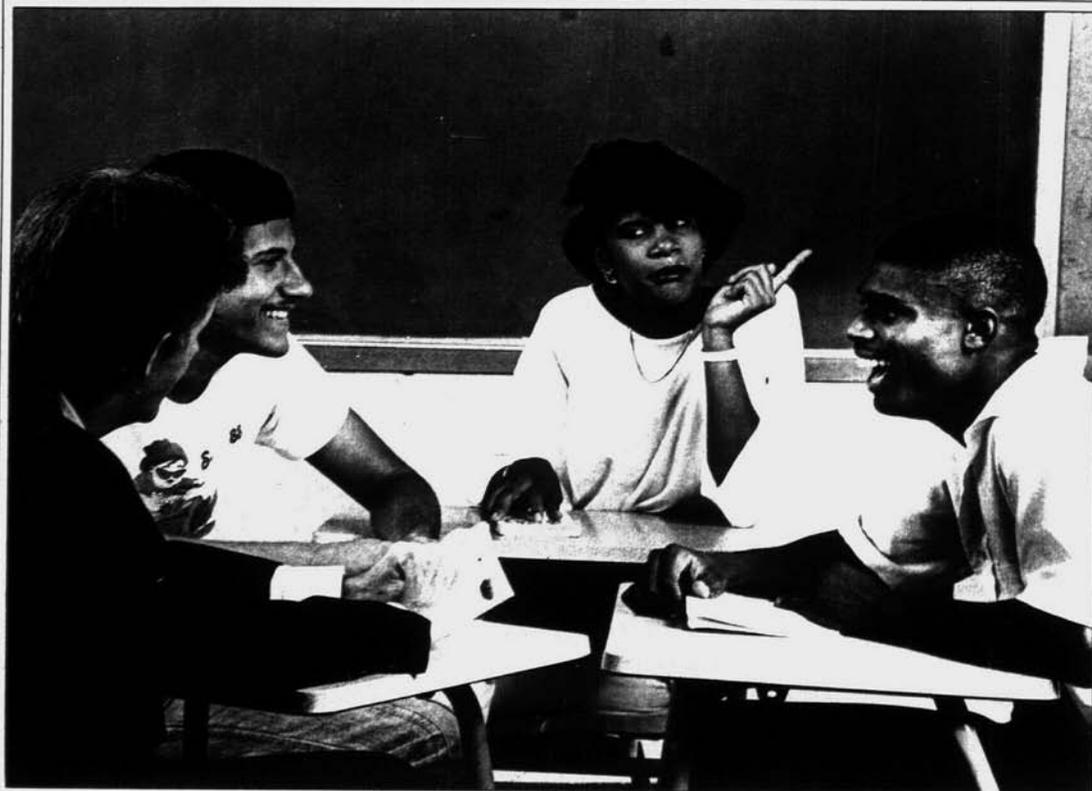


Artful teaching calls for the use of creativity, improvisation, and expressiveness—qualities that enhance, rather than detract from competent teaching.

didactic, "either cognitive knowledge acquired primarily by memorization [or] a mastery of skills acquired primarily by repetition and practice" (1973, p. 10). We saw many of these kinds of teaching-learning exchanges. Evocative teaching modes, on the other hand, stress inquiry and discovery (Axelrod 1973, p. 12). They force students to participate more directly in shaping the structure and direction of the class, eliciting what students know,

and helping them and their teachers to raise provocative and compelling questions. The result is artful teaching.

Gage expresses a similar viewpoint: "As a practical art, teaching must be recognized as a process that calls for intuition, creativity, improvisation, and expressiveness—a process that leaves room for departures from what is implied by rules, formulas, and algorithms" (1978, p. 15). When teaching is artful, one sees a sense of wonder, an



When Patrick Welsh, English teacher at T.C. Williams High School, Alexandria, Va., and his students discuss literature that touches the students' experience, the result may be an "emotional uplift" or shared laughter.

excitement in the subject matter, the free play of the imagination, a what-if vision of the world, an evoking of the unknown, and synthesis.

Nearly all the men and women we saw teaching are skilled in the craft of teaching. They present subject matter clearly, check on student mastery, maintain order in the classroom, assign and collect homework, carry on three conversations at one time, and perform a dozen other tasks. In the schools we visited, we saw highly competent teachers who are generally knowledgeable about subject matter, manage their classrooms with a minimum of disruption and interruption, appear confident about their work, acknowledge the differences among their students, display few biases and considerable warmth and affection. They are rarely thrown off their pace.

While we saw numerous examples of competent teaching, sometimes the instruction appeared arid. Many teachers, veterans of ten years or more,

often in the same school, sometimes with the same subject matter, conduct classes as though they were following an invisible script. They demonstrated the craft of teaching, but little artistry.

Yet, in rare moments, we also saw their art. As a high school science teacher and a class conducted an experiment, suspense mounted. The teacher and students did a series of what-if exercises; imagination, logic, and wonder filled the room. In another artful moment, an English teacher responded to a student's question about Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*. Cogent remarks on religion and modern society were followed by a provocative, insightful discussion between students and teacher. In a third classroom, as a junior high school language arts teacher and a small group of students edited short stories, they hunted for words, phrases, and details to make the stories come alive. But these moments were rare.

### The Routine of Teaching

Most classrooms were characterized by the routinizing of complex learning and teaching problems into predictable patterns. We often saw students in math classes, for example, going to the chalkboard, writing their versions of assigned homework problems, and listening to the teacher's review and correction. Other subject teaching has analogies: language teachers translate sentences; science teachers critique summaries of students' experiments; English and language arts teachers review grammar exercises.

Current practices and expectations encourage teachers to routinize. Several popular staff development programs recommend a sequence of instruction for effective teaching; teachers' manuals frequently provide not only a sequence of instruction, but a script, which can substitute for the teacher's own questions. With limited planning time to prepare for five or six classes a day, the wonder is that more

teachers do not succumb to these routines.

### **Lectures, Mini-Lectures, and Teacher Talk**

The predominant form of instruction we observed at the high school level was teacher talk. We heard full-length lectures and planned and impromptu mini-lectures, often imbedded within a discussion or recitation instructional format. We saw spontaneous teacher talk, sometimes directly focused on the content, but often only tangentially related to the task at hand. The quality of teacher talk varied greatly. A few stimulating, provocative lectures held students' attention and challenged them, but more often the talk was a factual content summary or loosely connected remarks.

The presence of lecturing and teacher talk in these schools is not surprising. Lecturing appeared to increase with the grade level and echoes what Goodlad reported in his study.

Explaining and lecturing constituted the most frequent teaching activities, according to teachers, students, and our observations. And the frequency of these activities increased steadily from the primary to the senior high school years (1984, p. 105).

Much of the research on classroom teaching at the secondary level demonstrates that teachers talk more than 70 percent of the time. This practice has not changed since the three-year secondary schools studies of Arno Bellack and his colleagues in the 1960s. They concluded that "teacher-pupil ratio of activity in terms of lines spoken is approximately 3 to 1" (Bellack et al. 1966, p. 84). Teacher talk continues to dominate classrooms in the 1980s. As Goodlad reports: "Teachers out-talked the entire class of students by a ratio of three to one" (1984, p. 229). Mini-lectures and lectures are not necessarily objectionable, but they should be planned and relevant.

Every classroom moment need not be filled with intense excitement. Who could, after all, withstand that kind of sustained pressure for seven or eight academic periods interrupted only by a 20-minute lunch period? Yet we are troubled by our frequent observations of teachers who think they are engaging students in sustained, thought-provoking, academic activity but who are not. Attentiveness is a weak substitute for active engagement.

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### **New Basics and the Curriculum**

In many classrooms we saw clear and effective presentations of parts of speech, mathematical formulas, and scientific experiments. But the purpose of the lesson was not always clear. When asked about their rationale for a topic, teachers typically said that it was knowledge "everybody ought to have" or skills "necessary for later life" or, in the junior high schools, "necessary for high school."

When teachers were asked about their role in curriculum decisions, they frequently cited involvement in curriculum review or revision. When we asked about the process, however, we learned that many curriculum decisions were predicated on a competency or achievement test or based on a text. Teachers seldom said that they had discussed basic assumptions underlying the choice of particular content or concepts included in the curriculum. Only rarely did teachers or administrators question whether what was being taught was pertinent.

We are not counseling a return to the "is it relevant" tests of the late '60s and early '70s. We are suggesting that a thoughtful analysis might avoid facile "educated people know these things"

and "you'll need it later in life" arguments. Such analysis might make it less likely that students would do an experiment solely for the purpose of mastering the experiment—rather than for the purpose of mastering the scientific method or of developing an inquiring mind about the natural world. Similarly, it might steer teachers away from teaching students how to read a particular poem by Robert Frost and to memorize its meaning—rather than learning how to read poetry, acquiring reading skills that transcend a particular poem.

### **Teachers Who Stay and Grey**

America's teachers are growing older. As opportunities for new teachers to enter the system declined during the past decade, many faculties, including those in the schools we visited, were necessarily composed of men and women in the middle and later years of their lives. While cause for neither celebration nor gloom, the situation bears reflection.

Although America as a society is growing older, teachers may be affected differently from most Americans. Most people, employed in work with continuing influxes of younger employees, grow older in the company of younger colleagues. Teachers, on the other hand, are employed by schools that have hired few young people in recent years.

As a teacher in one of the schools we visited observed: "You know, it's been nice being here for 15 years or so with all my friends. We've had great times together. I don't feel older, but when I look in the mirror I know I am older. I'm 51. My husband had an angina attack last winter. I wonder how we [the teachers] will weather all the changes and declines that we will endure in the next 10 years."

Another 45-year-old-plus teacher observed: "For years I thought it was great to be in the company of the young. You know, the old expression about staying young by being with the young. But now I don't know. They are so young, and I'm beginning to feel old. A few years ago I felt like one of them, sort of us against the world. Now I feel more like their mother. Do you understand?"

The presence of high percentages of "staying but greying" teachers, as one

teacher put it, has serious implications for staff development, morale, and professional growth. These teachers are not unhappy, despite an occasional "back to the trenches" remark as the bell rings. But they do wonder what will become of them in the next 10 or 15 years. Those who have made career-long commitments to teaching will continue to do what they are doing now.

Human and educational needs emerge from this condition. Larger schools will have significant cohorts of teachers moving toward retirement and asking the "What does it all mean?" questions together. How can schools accommodate the critical needs of these individuals? If nothing is done, teachers will continue to work in unchanging environments, and their heart's cry will go, if not unheard, unheeded.

As the larger cohort of older teachers moves toward retirement, a smaller group of young teachers, almost unnoticed, enters the schools. Unlike their counterparts who started teaching in the 1960s and early 1970s to fill the classrooms needed for the last bulge of the baby boom, the new teachers of the 1980s, at least for the moment, are a minority. Many of them express frustration, even anger, at the criticisms aimed at the quality of teaching; they question whether they want to follow the career commitments of their older colleagues. Their seasoned colleagues, young teachers say, are supportive and helpful, but they wish for more contact with other new teachers.

### **Moving from Competency to Art in Teaching**

The 19 schools that served as the basis for these observations, like the total of 273 schools visited in 1983 as part of the Secondary Schools Recognition Program, are good schools for young people. They provide positive, safe environments, reasonable curriculums, and competent teachers. We wonder why schools cannot substitute exciting artistry for quiet competency more frequently. We contend that young people deserve the personal and emotional uplift that comes from such teaching. They need it as much or more than they need to improve test scores.

**"When teaching is artful one sees a sense of wonder, an excitement in the subject matter, the free play of the imagination, a what-if vision of the world, an evoking of the unknown, and synthesis."**

The issues we have raised, based on our observations in schools, may contribute to the lack of inspirational teaching. The emphasis on order and competency, the random mini-lectures, the lack of attention to the art of teaching, the emphasis on the new basics, the growing old in place, and the dearth of younger career teachers—all may contribute to this quiet, competent but uninspired teaching.

Meanwhile, the pleasure that parents express with their children's schools causes us to wonder if anyone else sees problems, much less seeks answers. Yet, we would offer a few suggestions.

- School people should insist on order and competency in schools, but they should also ask what comes after the restoration of order. We hope one answer would be more inspirational teaching.

- As mini-lectures appear to be inevitable, teachers should give attention to their preparation, content, and delivery.

- Schools in which good order is the norm should be filled with discussion of the art of teaching. Workshops, conferences, seminars, and informal study groups could all play a part in focusing on these issues. The new

basics should be examined for the transcending knowledge, skills, and attitudes they offer students.

- School people should give serious attention to the issues and problems attending an aging faculty. They should ask how one maintains, renews, develops, increases, or enhances interest and excitement about what one has been doing for 10 to 20 years. How does one remain attentive to the needs of young people after school begins to be a rerun of events experienced many times?

- Educators should consider the needs of younger faculty beyond programs for first-year teachers, internships, and mentoring. What can faculty in their initial teaching years gain from the experiences of older faculty, and how, at the same time, can they build their own professional cohort? How can the school environment be enhanced so that dedicated teachers will continue to remain in the classroom?

We completed our visits convinced that even in the good public schools, much remains to be done. All students deserve no less than the level of quality observed in these schools. Good schools must, in turn, become even better if they are to exemplify levels of quality to which students, parents, faculties, and other schools can aspire. Educators must continue to question, develop, and grow. The institutions singled out in the Secondary School Recognition Program are useful benchmarks for this challenge. □

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