

Understanding What It Means to Be a Teacher

A professor who served as an elementary teacher's aide learned valuable lessons for how administrators can support caring teachers.



In September of 1985 I embarked on a personal pilgrimage to understand what it means to be a teacher in the '80s. I was motivated in part by a desire to reconnect with the ideals that had led me to become a teacher 15 years earlier. While my subsequent work in higher education and research proved satisfying for the most part, it had been premised on making contributions to a world that was becoming increasingly shadowy and distant.

Since most of my previous experience had been at the secondary level, I was interested to learn of the challenges of working with young children. I chose an urban elementary school of approximately 450 students in the Northwest, Palatine Elementary School¹ serves many Chapter 1 students. The multiethnic and multiracial student body tends to come from working class homes, many of which are headed by a single parent or two working parents.

I asked to serve as a part-time teacher aide several days a week. The principal, Paul Levy, assigned me to a 4th grade class taught by Jan Seymour. An experienced teacher, Seymour had recently transferred to Palatine after having been attacked by an angry mother at her previous school.

The daily journal entries that I made while at Palatine reflect my observations of classroom activities and conversations with teachers over lunch and with students in class. Periodic debriefings with Seymour and Levy, and recollections of my feelings about being back "in the trenches," revealed recurring themes about what it means to be a teacher.

Living with Contradictions

The personal odyssey each of us takes in search of meaning is essentially an effort to make sense of our lives. We seek the thread that connects our disparate experiences and brings coherence to them. For teachers at Palatine, the quest for meaning takes place amid a variety of contradictions, which, for the most part, have to be accommodated rather than overcome.

Uncertainty amid predictability. The scholarly literature on teaching led me to expect life in schools to be predictable. Fellow researchers, for example, had noted the similarities of

classroom and school routines across schools and districts and over time. While certain types of lessons did tend to look the same whether I observed in the 4th grade or the 6th, my overall impression was that the unexpected could happen at any moment.

Seymour, for example, could not be certain which students she would be teaching from one day to the next. Not only were four or five of them absent from school on a typical day, but students participating in pull-out programs were absent at various times throughout the day. Constant enrollments and withdrawals contributed to her uncertainty. In Seymour's class alone, four students transferred to other schools, and three new students arrived during the year. To make matters worse, enrollment fluctuations in the fall led to the loss of a teacher and the redistribution of her students among the remaining teachers. Two months after starting the year with a fairly manageable 25 students, Seymour was given 5 more students. Fourth grade reading and math groups, carefully formed in September, had to be reconstituted. It was early November before Seymour could report a relatively stable class size.

Uncertainty also characterized the school day. Teachers tried to create a routine by which students would spend the morning in homogeneously grouped reading sections and the afternoon in uniformly grouped math sections. Other fixed points in the day included homeroom, music, recess, and lunch. The time from 11:00 to 12:00 and from 12:30 to 1:30 was available for science, social studies, and other activities. In reality, however, this schedule was more honored in the breach than the observance. Frequently the integrity of the day was disturbed by special assemblies, expected and unexpected visitors, teacher absences, testing, and field trips. Several teachers openly questioned the value of planning in a situation characterized by many interruptions and last-minute changes.

Besides being unable to count on having particular students in class or carrying out a planned activity on schedule, teachers lived with the uncertainty of never knowing when certain troubled students would have a "bad day." Anticipation of such inci-

dents probably was as enervating and frustrating as the actual occurrence. One teacher likened the experience to waiting for a hidden time bomb to explode.

Add to these sources of uncertainty in the classroom the personal anxiety over job security. Even as a respected veteran with 16 years of experience, Seymour worried about her annual evaluation. Each time a new principal arrived or she transferred to a different school, Seymour's worries intensified. What's more, she worried about which of her valued colleagues would be around the following year. The year I worked at Palatine, almost every intermediate teacher was new to the school or the grade level. Fluctuating enrollments, negative evaluations, and a desire for career advancement were but some of the reasons for frequent staff turnover.

Given all that is uncertain about the circumstances under which teachers work, it no longer surprises me that teachers often appear to resist change. I, too, would cling to the familiar, even if it were less than ideal, in the face of such pervasive variability. I would also devalue planning—including lesson plans—if I sensed that the likelihood of implementing those plans was slight.

“[Teachers] work in crowded settings, but they strive to reach individuals. . . . Administrators tend to find meaning in collective experiences—implementation of a new program, increased test scores for the 8th grade, a reduced dropout rate.”

"I began to modify my 'administrator's perspective.' I stopped searching exclusively for classwide indications of successful teaching and began to concentrate on interactions with individual students."

Having realized that the context of teaching is not as predictable as some researchers would have us believe, I began to reflect on the process of preparing school administrators to be instructional leaders—a process in which I had heavily invested. School administrators must learn to acknowledge teachers' need for stability and refrain from using it as a basis for criticism. They must do all in their power to minimize surprises by alerting teachers well in advance of changes in staff, procedures, class composition, and schedules. It may be impossible to eliminate uncertainty completely, but administrators can do much to minimize its impact on instruction.

Love-hate relations with parents. Another contradiction with which Seymour and her colleagues had to live concerned relations with parents. One minute teachers complained that the poor performance of many students derived directly from ineffective parenting: "If only parents would take a greater interest in their children's schooling." When parents actually did become involved in school activities, teachers voiced concern over the intrusion. Parental irritants sometimes

centered on unscheduled classroom visits for conferences or surprise birthday parties. Ironically, when teachers invited parents to school—for semester conferences and back-to-school nights—attendance was low.

I found the parental "presence" at Palatine to be pervasive. Even when no parents were physically occupying space in the school, they were present in spirit. Teachers rarely made an instructional or disciplinary decision without weighing the possible reaction of parents. For example, one desperate parent wanted Seymour to spank her son if he misbehaved. Two other parents wanted no photographs taken of their children in school. One parent left explicit orders not to allow her ex-husband to see her daughter. Several minority parents were highly suspicious of Seymour and other white teachers. Parents who allowed or sometimes encouraged their children to miss school were held in particularly low esteem by teachers. The school social worker occasionally was dispatched to homes to bring students to school.

The invisible parental presence also could be detected in the behavior of their children. Parents' frustrations, arguments, and economic problems frequently spilled over into the classroom as their sons and daughters displayed anger, anxiety, and sadness. Seymour reported several instances of suspected child abuse and kept a personal log in case she was called to testify. Parental neglect, while not as dramatic as physical abuse, also took its toll. One student, whose alcoholic mother consistently sent him to school with unwashed clothes that were far too thin to provide warmth in the winter, finally had to be taken to a local "angel" for decent clothing.

Seymour searched for curriculum materials that might help her students understand the turmoil in their home lives, but few could be found. As one who works with school administrators, I will urge them to press for the development of booklets, pamphlets, films, and other materials covering such topics as divorce, abuse, blended families, relocation, job loss, and parental alcoholism. Fourth graders are not too young, I discovered, to have a need to discuss these matters.

Teachers, as well, need opportunities to discuss their concerns about

parents and homes. Such discussions can be aimed at reaching agreement about appropriate procedures for handling parent-related problems in school. At Palatine I learned that few things upset parents more than interactions with school personnel that suggest no one knows what anyone else is doing.

Good Intentions and Limited Energy

Every teacher at Palatine seemed to possess the best of intentions for the students. No teacher I met, however, was blessed with unlimited energy. Teaching means, among other things, constantly balancing good intentions against limited energy.

I think of the day when Seymour tried to deal with several phone calls from upset parents, a change in the daily schedule, the failure of the school evaluation team to discuss one of her students referred for learning and behavior problems, and an observation by the principal—all of this while trying to coordinate normal activities for a class of 30! Such days were by no means unusual.

To conserve precious energy, Palatine teachers created informal triage systems, similar in purpose to battlefield surgery units. Students were judged to be "good bets" or "poor bets" to benefit from instruction. Those judged good bets got lots of encouragement, assistance, and opportunities to exercise responsibility. Other students, while not treated badly by any means, received less monitoring, follow-up, and constructive interaction with teachers. Many of the bad bets missed 30 or more days of school and were frequently late on other occasions. In addition, they tended to be involved in pull-out programs, which may have made it easier for classroom teachers to minimize their involvement. To insist that every bad bet make up every assignment missed because of absence, tardiness, or engagement in a pull-out activity would have required the efforts of a full-time teacher aide.

I noted that most teachers selected two or three bad bets as "projects" for the year. Max was one of Seymour's projects, and I often was asked to work with him in small groups or on a tutorial basis. Max's home life with his

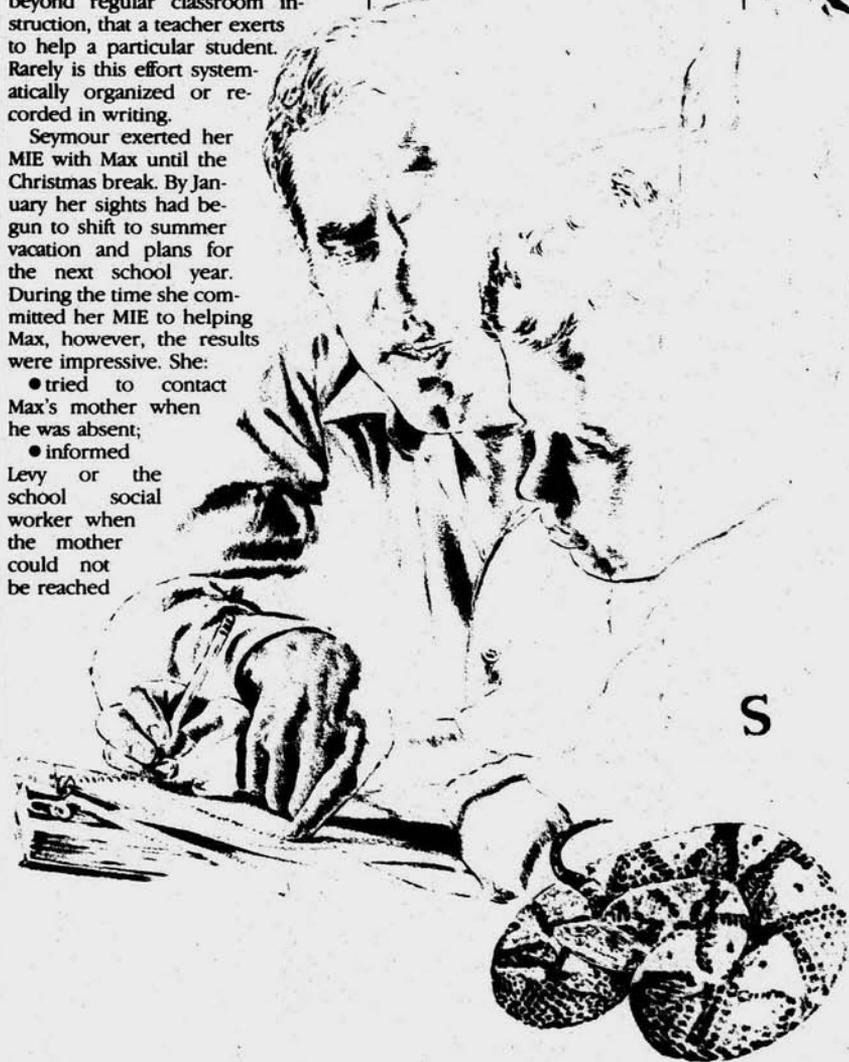
mother was a shambles—a series of eviction notices and new boyfriends. He was socially immature and several years behind grade level in reading and language development. But Max was appealing in a strange way. Maybe it was his diminutive size and large eyes, reminiscent of a waif from a Dickens novel. As I watched Seymour work with Max, I began to sense what a teacher is capable of doing to help a troubled child. Let me call this capability a teacher's "maximum instructional effort" (MIE)—all the extra effort, beyond regular classroom instruction, that a teacher exerts to help a particular student. Rarely is this effort systematically organized or recorded in writing.

Seymour exerted her MIE with Max until the Christmas break. By January her sights had begun to shift to summer vacation and plans for the next school year. During the time she committed her MIE to helping Max, however, the results were impressive. She:

- tried to contact Max's mother when he was absent;
- informed Levy or the school social worker when the mother could not be reached

or when Max looked sick, underfed, or dirty;

- pressed for Max to be assessed by the school evaluation committee;
- tried to get the child welfare worker to involve Max in a support group;
- designated me to help Max complete his assignments;
- made a special point of welcoming Max to class each day he showed up;



S

- prepared special assignments, based on Max's interests, to boost his self-esteem;

- saw to it that Max got warm clothes and shoes to wear in the winter;

- read test questions out loud to help Max complete tests; and

- worked with Max during teacher planning periods.

Obviously no teacher has sufficient energy to sustain such efforts indefinitely. And not every teacher's MIE is always successful. I noted several instances where teachers began to diminish their MIE's just at a point where students were beginning to respond positively to the extra attention. In Max's case, the effort paid off. Not only did his mother say the year had been his best in school, but Max's test scores rose dramatically.

I find the notion of MIE fascinating. School administrators need to understand how teachers go about selecting students with whom to work on an intensive basis and what such intervention entails. Perhaps there are ways they can assist teachers involved in an MIE or help them pool experiences. When one teacher's intensive efforts to help a student begin to subside, administrators may be able to locate others to continue the MIE, thereby increasing the chances that a "bad bet" will become a "good bet."

Emotional Roller Coasters

Trying to help troubled students can expose teachers to an emotional roller

coaster rivaling any amusement park thrill ride. My work with Max was illustrative. Max enabled me to get in touch with the full range of my emotions, but I'm not certain I'm entirely grateful.

My first feeling for Max was hopefulness, as I anticipated the benefits he would receive—and perhaps acknowledge—as a result of working closely with me. I counted on my commitment, cleverness, and classroom management skills to help Max "get down to business." It didn't take three weeks for hopefulness to give way to hurt and anger as I watched Max reject my efforts to help and continue his childish antics. At one point I—who had written five books on classroom management—became so upset with his immature behavior that I jerked Max's chair out from under him, sending him plummeting to the floor. The desperate act got his attention, but in a way that cost me my poise and a measure of self-respect.

But by mid-October my feelings of hurt and anger had given way to compassion. How could I become short-tempered with a wan, undersized boy whose alcoholic mother was incapable of providing a secure home and who often came to school hungry and cold? Still, I recognized that even victims are capable of victimizing others. How should I deal with Max when he disrupted his reading group or behaved foolishly during large-group instruction? Sympathy blended with confusion as I tried to find ways to help Max

that would not deprive other children of their chances to learn.

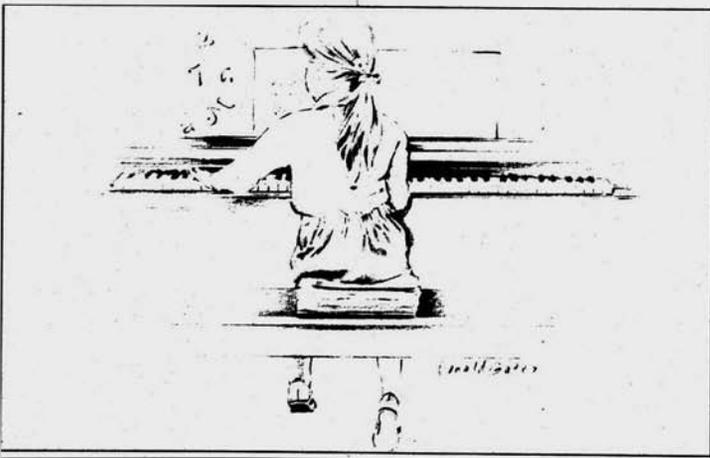
After weeks of failure to find an answer, I began to feel a growing detachment from Max. I reasoned that I was guilty of hubris to think I could save him. After all, there were 29 other youngsters with whom I could establish a meaningful professional relationship. Detachment from Max also would permit me to face myself in the morning with some hope for a productive day in class.

Then, almost imperceptibly, things began to change. I don't quite know why, but it may have been some advice from Seymour. She shared my frustration but suggested I simply work on making Max feel welcome. "Tell him you're glad to see him, even when you're not," she recommended. I tried to accept Max and to deal with him in a patient, caring, firm way. By early January I noticed that he would settle down on occasion and complete an assignment or listen while another student read aloud. I began taking time to listen to him, particularly to his stories about snakes. Slowly, I felt myself becoming hopeful again.

Then a bombshell exploded: Max's mother was ordered to vacate her apartment. For weeks Max either missed school or arrived in such a state of turmoil that he might as well have been absent. He said he was living in a hotel, but he didn't know where. His behavior rapidly deteriorated, and his interest in chatting with me disappeared. The assistance that was supposed to be coming from school specialists and welfare agencies failed to materialize. I grew cynical and despondent as I realized that our hard-gained ground was eroding.

Meanwhile, there were at least six other children whose unfortunate circumstances and tremendous needs called upon a full range of my emotional support. What was the answer? How could I—or any other educator—work with children like Max without also undertaking long-term therapy? Was the solution to avoid having any expectations at all? How, though, could I reconcile having no expectations at a time when teachers were being told that a key to school effectiveness was holding high expectations for all students?

I cannot answer these questions, but I have learned to recognize small suc-



“Perhaps the most important lesson I relearned was the critical role of acceptance in learning. . . . Real learning is unlikely to occur until a child feels accepted and respected by the teacher and at least some classmates.”

cesses. Relative to his previous years in school, Max had a terrific year. He scored well on his basic skills tests and missed fewer days of school. To appreciate these gains I needed to talk about Max with Seymour, Levy, and others. I had learned another lesson about how to run a school. Opportunities must be created for teachers to review their work with students and receive peer reinforcement and advice. Without such opportunities, it may be impossible to determine whether any of us are making a difference with troubled students.

Building Relationships in a Crowd

Most teachers are clinicians at heart. They work in crowded settings, but they strive to reach individuals, and the meaning teachers derive from their work is tied to the quality of relations with individual students. Teachers do not teach a class; they teach 30 individual students. It would be difficult to identify an occupation where more relationships are built over the course of a career than in teaching.

Administrators, on the other hand, tend to find meaning in collective experiences—implementation of a new program, increased test scores for the 8th grade, a reduced dropout rate. It's not that administrators are wrong and teachers are right. It's just that they differ when it comes to what is regarded as meaningful. Failure to appreciate these differences can lead to unproductive relations between teachers and administrators.

As I observed Seymour work during the year, an image kept coming to mind. I saw a conductor simultaneously running 30 individual recitals. If the class worked from my point of view, the result was a coherent symphony. If the class worked from her standpoint, there were 30 enjoyable recitals. Whether or not an observer could hear a symphony was not of primary importance to her.

Warm, trusting relations between teachers and students may not be essential to productive learning in suburban areas where children are more likely to come to school already feeling accepted and confident. In schools like Palatine, however, it would be fruitless to dwell on academics until care first had been taken to build relationships with students. It could require several months to do so, but the alternative was to try to *force* students to learn. Many of Palatine's students came to school feeling so unsure of their own abilities and so distrustful of adults that their ability to benefit from instruction was seriously impaired. It would have been a waste of time for teachers to plunge into academic work without taking time to get to know students and vice versa. I began to modify my "administrator's perspective." I stopped searching exclusively for classwide indications of successful teaching and began to concentrate on interactions with individual students.

Ironically, teachers at Palatine often had more success relating to students than they did to each other. Relations, for example, between primary and intermediate teachers and between classroom teachers and specialists were particularly strained. Teachers seemed to regard Palatine as a zero-sum game in which one player could not win unless another lost. Classroom teachers could not be relieved of their

large class sizes unless specialists were released. Teachers at one grade level could not give able students an advanced reader without using materials that teachers in higher grades had planned to use. Faculty jealousies developed around such issues as planning time, teacher aides, and access to resources. I was amazed at the absence of forums in which these concerns could be aired and deliberated and, subsequently, at the overall lack of strong collegial relations at Palatine.

Lessons for the Professor

Reflecting on my year at Palatine has yielded insights that will benefit me personally and professionally. As anyone who has returned to the classroom knows, the experience can be very humbling, even humiliating. I discovered that I could not walk into any class at any level and teach. I was also disappointed to learn the quickness with which I was willing to abandon theory in the face of exceptions. Instead of realizing, for example, that Max was an exception to the rule that reinforcing appropriate behavior is more effective than punishing inappropriate behavior, I immediately assumed that the former strategy was a waste of time for all students. It took me weeks to acknowledge that there was no reason to abandon a perfectly

“Administrators must take great care to avoid doing things that diminish the meaningfulness of the school experience—for teachers as well as students.”



NEW!

**Complete Kits
for Teaching
French and Spanish
to Students K-8!**

Learning through Actions!

Foreign language instruction is made extremely easy with the Alpha-Plus kits because Alpha-Plus gives you the opportunity to teach young students a foreign language in a proven effective, fun, systematic way.

Each Alpha-Plus kit contains everything the teacher needs to achieve effective results. Included in each kit: Teacher Guide (divided into 48 lessons with progress tests); 150+ Language Visuals (puppets, clocks, numbers, etc.); Student Workbook; and, Student Cassette Tapes.

Alpha-Plus foreign language instruction is a highly motivating and comprehensive approach to the teaching of a second language. It is based on the students' learning through actions and involvement. With the Alpha-Plus system students learn faster and easier, plus retain the target language longer because they are involved in the learning process.

Complete Kit \$150.00

To Order: Call Toll Free

1-800-233-3507

In Oklahoma call 405-360-0661

Visa/MasterCard and School Purchase Order accepted



ALPHA-PLUS

Foreign Language Systems

618 S.E. 27th, Dept. E, Edmond, OK 73034

"Fashioning a vision to which an entire school can commit heart and mind is, I suspect, one of the central challenges facing contemporary school administrators."

good theory simply because it failed to work for Max. I laughed at myself for doing something I had often criticized teachers for doing: seeking a classroom management "recipe" that would work for everyone.

My experience at Palatine also served as an important reminder of some basic truisms learned years ago. I was reminded of how much children like to be listened to. What we tell children is probably of less value in the long run than what we allow them to tell us. The opportunity to be really heard, not just allowed to speak, requires children to organize thoughts and feelings and convey them to another person. What could be more central to the educational process?

I learned again the importance of predictability for children. They appreciate good organization and clear directions. Sometimes we place too much value on surprise and on spontaneity, thinking that these are antidotes to student boredom. The answer to the problem of boredom, I was reminded, has more to do with interesting subject matter and active involvement than constantly changing schedules and spur-of-the-moment happenings.

Perhaps the most important lesson I relearned was the critical role of acceptance in learning. I had forgotten Maslow's proposition that humans need to feel accepted *before* they can devote themselves to the pursuit of competence. I had fallen into accepting people who were achievers: work

hard and you'll earn respect. By contrast, experiences with Max and his peers forced me to realize that real learning is unlikely to occur *until* a child feels accepted by the teacher and at least some classmates.

Lessons for Administrators

Administrators must take great care to avoid doing things that diminish the meaningfulness of the school experience—for teachers as well as students. Placing undue stress on test scores, allowing the school day to become fragmented, failing to appreciate the value of relationships, and disregarding the integrity of teachers' lessons by arriving late to observe them and leaving early are but a few of the actions that can undermine meaning. To enhance meaningfulness, administrators should spend more time talking to teachers about *individual* students—their progress and problems.

Administrators must protect teachers from remaining overextended for too long. Many teachers are capable of giving 150 percent, but not indefinitely. Thus, administrators should be prepared to intervene on their behalf and to create opportunities for teachers to talk with each other constructively. Service-oriented professionals probably derive more meaning from involvement in causes greater than themselves than from the pursuit of personal goals. Fashioning a vision to which an entire school can commit heart and mind is, I suspect, one of the central challenges facing contemporary school administrators.

During the mid-'80s a plethora of sober and sensible recommendations have been issued to guide the improvement of public education. My year at Palatine Elementary School leads me to endorse many of these recommendations, particularly those dedicated to bettering teaching. However, most of the recommendations are unlikely to have a lasting impact unless policymakers and school administrators look beyond the merit pay schemes and teacher literacy tests to what it means to be a teacher. □

1. Palatine Elementary School, Paul Levy, Jan Seymour, and Max are pseudonyms.

Daniel L. Duke is director of the Educational Administration Program, Lewis and Clark College, Portland, OR 97219.

Copyright © 1986 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.