

THE CRISIS IN EDUCATION

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Not Enough Adequate Teachers

Teacher shortages or surpluses have in the past been viewed as minor problems which will adjust themselves by the natural fine-tuning of the marketplace. If there are too many teachers today, fewer will enter preparation programs tomorrow, so that shortly there will be just enough to meet the needs. Conversely, if there aren't enough teachers to meet the present need, there will be summer and other short-term special recruitment programs which will quickly solve the temporary problem. What occurs quite regularly in teacher education would be unthinkable in other fields. What if there were to be a doctor shortage? The solution to that problem would not be found in special intensive programs to prepare doctors. This is all by way of saying that, in other professions, shortages and surpluses are not dealt with through a process of hit or miss market corrections. Why in education? The question begets another question: How valuable is education to society?

A good deal of the talk about the crisis in education, and whatever is being done about it, concerns two issues - the impending teacher shortage, and the erosion of quality in the ranks. Consequently, there have been efforts to recruit more and better teachers. Notwithstanding, teachers continue to leave the profession in droves, and the better teachers leave more quickly than the

mediocre and poor ones. Therefore, if the past is an indication of the future, then the effects of "merely" trying to recruit even more and even better candidates for teaching will reflect yet greater number of resignations from the profession and a greater discrepancy between the capabilities of those who remain and those who fell. It seems reasonable to not only attempt to recruit more and better teachers (after all, who could actively discourage that worthy notion?), but also to examine the literally millions of people who are not teaching today - who either were teachers or were eligible to teach. It has been estimated that, while there are upwards of two million teachers serving our public schools, there are more than five million other people who were prepared to teach or actually taught - and quit the profession. At a time when society worries about incompetent teachers, or not enough excellent ones, or not enough of any kind, we might ask, "What's going on?" What happened to the throngs who retreated from the profession? Where are they? What are their life stories? What can we learn from their experiences?

Not too many years ago, there was a concerted effort on the part of child welfare agencies to locate the two million children presumed to be out of school, to get them back into school, but also to insure that there would never again be an America with two million children (or even a single child) rejected by the schools. There is an analogy here to our "lost teachers". We must find them, we must seek to understand them, and we must try to insure that the future generations of teachers enjoy higher morale, greater purposefulness and longevity in the profession.

Better Policies Needed

In a way, what's been occurring to teachers and the schools is, in

principle, exactly the problem we have until recent years faced in mental retardation - the viewing of our concerns as individual (or clinical) issues rather than systemic (on policy) issues. In the past, such problems as toilet training or mobility were seen as concerns connected with particular children. We seem now to view teachers' low morale as problems they have. To be sure, a child who is not toilet trained has a problem, as an unhappy teacher has a problem. But it isn't only their problems, but the larger society's. Until we begin to attack such problems from not only the perspective that the individual needs to change but also that society needs to change, resolution will continue to escape us. One of the hopeful signs that the crisis in teaching will eventually be addressed by the larger society is the increasing criticism of our schools. Once upon a time, people neither much criticized the schools nor seemed to care about them. Today there is criticism, but that's also because there is greater interest in our schools and greater resolve to improve them. The problem has been heated up during the past several years, and while it's been a painful experience for professionals, some of us are encouraged by that very heat - if not always the pain.

Today, there are strenuous efforts by "everyone" from the President of the United States to the local school board member to increase the ranks and improve the quality of teachers of science and mathematics. The President has called for a national effort to provide scholarships, summer workshops for teachers, and resources for the schools to improve their science and mathematics programs. Notwithstanding, the problems we have - the crisis in our schools - is much broader and more pervasive than what will be solved in addressing particular issues in science and mathematics. Before World War II, our teachers for the most part were better educated than the parents of their pupils. Despite the fact

that many teachers are better educated today than they were forty years ago, it is no longer clear that the aforementioned differences still exist. The very successes of the American schools have contributed to the crisis. That is, teachers today are much more like other citizens than they were years ago. And if nothing else, there should be agreement that teachers be at least among our most educated citizens.

How is this to be accomplished? By worrying so much about the superiority of the Honda or Toyota in contrast with the Buick and Ford? Because, after all, that is at least part of the reason which propels our President to single out science and mathematics instruction as the most serious problem in the schools. Might the President better call for an invigoration of all of the schools, and improvement in the quality of all of the teachers? And if that is too grandiose for the resources available, might he better ask for greater support to prepare elementary teachers? After all, third-grade children grow up, and if they're well educated in the early grades they will be better able to handle the high school and, eventually, the university curriculum. Scientists and mathematicians read. There is even a history of science, and a philosophy of science. People are educated or they're not educated; and to rely on the relatively "quick fix" of science and mathematics to alleviate the crisis in the schools may be as useful as taking an enema bag to Onondaga Lake in Syracuse in order to alleviate its pollution. Precisely every condition which has led to the erosion of quality in science and mathematics education is present in all other fields of education - elementary education, the other secondary areas, special education, you name it. We must improve the schools and other places where children are educated, or we will not produce the scientists and mathematicians necessary to support and enrich the culture we have created. But there may be unintended

negative consequences to our efforts if they are single-minded. To simply infuse science and mathematics education with better teachers and greater resources may weaken other programs which will be "paying" for those improvements. It's not that we are against such programs, but they are simply not enough to do what is needed. They even divert us from more genuine needs - such as providing all children with proper and necessary early foundations for learning.

Schools of Education Need to Change

There is a paradox explored engagingly by Judge (1982). After visits to several schools of education located in prestigious research universities, he raises a puzzling question. Why is it that in a country such as ours (he's an Englishman) - a country which provides more resources for public education than probably any other, a country in which education enjoys a genuinely important place, a country which esteems higher education as it esteems hardly any other enterprise - schools of education are viewed as the pariahs of the academy? Indeed, why do they view themselves with insecurity and self doubt?

In his foreword to Judge's book, Harold Howe offers three reasons for the paradox. First, there is so much graduate work in education in the United States - by the very nature of the vast volume of resources (people) required to replenish the education industry - that it must necessarily be mediocre. And unfortunately, most people fail to see the genuine "steeples of excellence" in a landscape dominated by molehills. Secondly, education at best is a confused subject, one which is presumed to be too complex for people outside of the field to comprehend adequately. Thirdly, education is so anchored to the work of the country's public schools - it is so much in the public's eye - that it suffers from widespread publicity of the low Scholastic Achievement Test

scores and Graduate Record Exam scores of aspiring teachers and graduate students in education. And all too often, our reactions followed the arguments that: If a field can't count on quality, it can at least hope for pity; and if it can't expect respect, it can fall back on survival.

For whatever reasons - and whether Harold Howe is accurate in his assessment, or whether there are other more valid explanations - it would be difficult to contradict Judge's assertion that, in the United States, education as a scholarly profession has low prestige; and, furthermore, educational practitioners - be they teachers, administrators, or professors - are not considered to be of the "stuff" which yields the American Dream. "Everyone" appears to agree with Judge that, in mid-20th century America, education is not a success story.

The Universities Must Change

The business of a university is the life of the mind. Whether to discover or create, whether to illuminate or portray, whether to define or examine the world, the community of scholars is devoted to activities of the mind at its highest, but also its most human level. But a community of scholars, as such, is necessarily incomplete. By itself, it could only endure for the span of one generation's mature years. The life of the mind, like every other life, extends itself only through a concern with the young - by making certain that the young will not only inherit but build on the achievements of the old. A university expresses this fundamental concern through support of its school of education. There is a cloud over education, quite old and enduring, but exacerbated several years ago by abrupt declines in school enrollments. And so, schools of education found themselves with graduates who couldn't be placed, dwindling enrollments, a government bent on disassembling its support for education, and a society which

appeared to have lost faith and patience in its schools, its teachers, and the institutions which serve those purposes (or possibly, a society which has more expectations of - more faith in - education than the educators themselves).

Through much of the '70's, schools of education bore greater resemblances to funeral parlors than centers for higher learning. What of the future? Will the student declines in schools of education continue? Will university education schools eventually become extinct? The answers to such questions seem clear enough to me. The university that takes little interest in education ignores the foundation for its survival. By being concerned with education, the university establishes the basis for a society in which the scholarly life is likely. The relationship between what occurs in the first grade class and what occurs at the graduate school is profound and direct.

So I ask rhetorically: What can a university expect from its school of education? While the arts and sciences may legitimately represent the core of knowledge of the university, the school of education may deserve recognition as the primary place that "worries" about the conditions under which people learn. While a college of arts and sciences (indeed, each school of a university) transmits knowledge, the school of education is concerned with not only the transmittal - the teaching - but the learning. Of course, good teachers everywhere "worry" about learning, but even those teachers take learning more for granted than their teaching. Good teachers worry most about teaching. In a school of education, we deliberately study teachers and learners. We deliberately examine the ethos, the mechanisms, the tools of the teaching-learning interaction. We have a fundamental concern with the transmission of knowledge and skills. "Everyone" is concerned with eating. But farmers are concerned in a different way. Their "worrying" about it results in people having enough food. In that sense, the

school of education can be more central to a university than many other schools in the university - many others with higher enrollments and greater prestige. A university can exist not only without an engineering school, for example, but without deliberate attention to the field of engineering. Or a medical school. Or a law school. How can a university exist without people in its community devoted to the education of its students?

The centrality of the school of education is further buttressed by its influence beyond the university's boundaries. There is a direct connection between how well a freshman student does in calculus and how well he was taught in the elementary and high school. On the university campus, education must be the business not only of those concerned with the preparation of teachers but of all of its professors. This concern must go beyond the appointment of "dual professors." A university community must not only seek to understand what all of its students and teachers do, but also what elementary and high schools are like, where our teachers come from, what our communities do for their schools, what our society wants from its schools.

Society Has An Opportunity to Change

Some people have expressed the notion that because the education industry is so large - encompassing more than 2,000,000 teachers in our public schools, thousands of administrators, thousands of professors of education, and uncounted numbers of people who earn their way by supplying, evaluating, and writing about the field - it is not possible to attract and retain intelligent and qualified professionals for such work. College and university students in education consistently score lower on Scholastic Aptitude Tests than, for example, medical and law students in the other professions. There is also widespread belief that the most creative and independent new teachers are more often the ones who "fail"

on their first assignments. They are sometimes referred to as "trouble makers." It's possible that they don't fit into the culture of schools; that is, they don't easily accept traditional attitudes and practices as easily as, for example, more compliant (ostensibly less capable) teachers. There has been the suggestion that our system of universal education - the fact that America wants its children educated - contributes to the eroding quality of our schools. When virtually every child goes to school, when half of American youth go to a college or university, it's a much different system than when only the so-called "cream" are permitted to move through the public schools, much less higher education. The democratization of schooling in America - the idea of the country itself - which flourished on the proposition that every citizen deserves a full education, places burdens on our schools and universities which other countries don't experience. We appear to have an egalitarian national educational policy and an elitist goal. Hence, a good deal of tension and irresolution.

That's the solution? One simple-minded reaction is to give in to the dilemma, concede that teachers need not be especially capable or studious. With that solution, standards would be reduced further in order to meet the demand for constant replenishment of bodies who retired, died, or simply wore out. Support for such an argument is, in part, based on data which indicate that more than half the teachers leave the profession within five years of entry. Therefore, it is suggested that we simply develop a different system, one with easy access to the profession, but also with a revolving door - where possibly all teachers could be encouraged to find other occupations after a few years. Such a policy would surely keep school budgets down; and that too seems to be on America's mind. But that argument works only if we conclude that a "solution" is found when we give everyone the disease in order to treat the disease - i.e., when

the disease becomes the norm. It seems that sensible people can secure better resolution of the dilemma implicit in a very large and heterogeneous field requiring outstanding practitioners.

Of course, the quality of education is influenced by many factors. Austerity is the slogan of the day. Powered by public demand, the federal and state governments are eager to reduce expenses of all sorts. Basic political distinctions have been blurred, if not set aside, as hawks join doves in cutting budgets. Even those who seek to spend more develop elaborate rationales to "demonstrate" that spending more costs less. Reducing expenses is more than a mood or a movement; it's an avalanche of money-saving measures. And it has had its impact on education, possibly more so than in any other sphere of our nation's concerns. In the shadow of more than 200 billion dollar deficits, we may not have noticed that, while it may make sense to buy cheaper tanks, to waste less fuel, and to intercept welfare fraud, it makes no sense to buy cheaper education. Indeed, we can spend less - whether in money or other resources - on education. But to do so is not to make education cheaper, but to change education into an activity which costs less, and which teaches lessons qualitatively different than those taught previously.

The point is that education is not like a commodity - one of which we can buy more or less, depending on how much we can or want to spend. Education is the inevitable result of each individual life in a finite society. Its volume cannot be adjusted or turned off. The only choices we can make pertain to the kind of education which shapes the life. The child of good fortune learns that the world cares about him, that the world has a place for him in good schools with good teachers. But the child of poverty and discrimination also is educated - in very different ways, but as forcefully and indelibly as the child of good fortune. Children today who learn about the world in times when school budgets are reduced,

when teachers' salaries are too low to make them self-supporting, and when schools of education are collapsing or threatened, are not necessarily being educated more cheaply, but always very differently from their predecessors. The shift in emphasis from quality, opportunity, and equity to cost and austerity not only affects the school's curriculum but is a major part of that curriculum. It teaches, among other things, that education is not a high social priority, and that teachers are not particularly respected members of society. The lesson here is that the shift is the curriculum - not something which "merely" affects it. Of course, the nation should not be pouring money recklessly into schools and colleges. The withdrawal of money is not as distressing as the withdrawal of support. Unfortunately, today's high school graduates show that they have learned our society's curriculum too well - seeking a career in education is among the last things they now seem to want to do.

Society has a choice - not between expensive and cheap education, but between good and bad education, between the kind of education we want for our children and the kind we do not want. What exactly do we mean by good education? For convenience or necessity, there are those who define it in terms of the job-market. In this way of thinking, if every job (or vocation or career) slot is filled by a qualified person, the educational provisions of society are just right. Indeed, in this view, a surplus of people educated at any level or field constitutes a problem. But, as educators (we are tempted to say, "as civilized people") we cannot accept such a view. While a complete specification of a good education is clearly too big a task here, I can suggest some irreducible ingredients. Our goal is that each child's potential be valued and cultivated; that educational resources be available to each child regardless of his or her social or economic standing or presumed future employment prospects. In short, a good education begins with the assumption that each child will become an important

component of the world's intellectual treasure. A good education begins with the unwillingness to surrender that assumption, the unwillingness to believe or behave as if one human being is more valuable as a human being than another. And, finally, I believe that this view of education is not only a moral ideal, but the best practical means of meeting our society's needs for competent people in every sphere.

Reference

Judge, H. American graduate schools of education: A view from abroad, New York: The Ford Foundation, 1982.