

Our Public Schools: Another Look

A teacher on the virtues and vice of teaching.

SAMUEL SHAPIRO

STARTLED OUT OF its complacency, American public opinion at last recognizes some of the achievements of the Soviet educational system, and some of the failings of our own. Articles on education, once confined to the dull pages of professional journals, now appear in mass magazines. Clergymen, congressmen, admirals, Mrs. Roosevelt, and even President Eisenhower all suggest remedies and emphasize how important it is that we "catch up" to the Russians.

The controversy over progressive education, renewed six or seven years ago by opponents of the dominant theory of pedagogy, has flared into flame, and new books add fuel to the fire almost monthly. In all this argument, nevertheless, one voice is silent — one group deeply concerned with our schools has said little. America's classroom teachers, the really operative power in our educational system, express themselves only by occasional letters to editors or by serving as subjects for *Life* cameramen.

Teachers are busy people, often overworked, some of them — the men especial-

ly — holding second or third jobs to supplement salaries. Unlike college professors, they are not expected to be articulate in print, and some of them rightly fear the repercussions which might result from their criticism of the school system. As a former public-school teacher, with eight years' experience ranging from kindergarten to the twelfth grade, I propose to examine here some of the advantages and disadvantages of teaching as a profession, and to suggest why so many teachers like myself have left — and will leave — the public-school system.

I begin with the attractive side of teaching as a career. It is the easiest profession to enter. Law, engineering, college teaching, medicine—all require arduous preparation, training in strict disciplines, years of study terminating in difficult examinations. Even to be admitted to a good medical school requires intense effort, excellent grades, and intellectual ability. Certification as a teacher is much more easily come by. In many states only a bachelor's degree is required, and many of the credits for this can be obtained through notoriously

easy courses in Education. I mean no disservice to dedicated teachers when I point out that the public schools often recruit those weaker college students who never could pass a bar examination or convince a state medical board.

Really able students who wish to teach are apt to groan at the twenty to thirty-odd hours of Education courses foisted upon him by the system — though these courses are conducted at a level so low that they can be completed with next to no effort. We may hope that recent attacks on them by writers like Lynd or Bestor may bring about, eventually, a reduction in the swollen license and salary schedules that foster such proliferation of Education courses; just now they seem, like a lawyer's paper-work and a politician's dinners, an inescapable occupational curse. People genuinely interested in teaching are disgusted by these courses, but are not necessarily deterred from becoming teachers.

So public-school teaching is easy to enter; nor are the material rewards so meagre as some assert. Ten years ago, when I began teaching, the New York City scale, one of the highest in the nation, was \$12.50 a day, or \$2,500 a year. This beginning salary has since doubled; and after fourteen years, a kindergarten teacher who has accumulated enough credits will automatically earn \$8,400, even if she never is promoted to a higher position. This is more than the average salary in most colleges, more indeed than is earned by many full professors with many published books to their credit. And teaching, unlike the manufacture of automobiles or guided missiles, knows no layoffs, short-ages, or shut-downs. When he has received tenure (after three years), the city teacher has assured himself of some financial security for all his life.

The job, measured against similar posts held by people of comparable skill, has other attractions. Though there are lessons to prepare and homework to mark, still one need be in school only six hours a day, thirty hours a week; there remains

time to read, to think, to recuperate from the strain of dealing with crowds of children. At intervals — and how one needs them! — there is a week's vacation at Christmas, another at Easter; July and August free with pay. The retirement system is honest, ample, and decently administered; after thirty or thirty-five years, one can leave the system and count on a fair income for life. (At present salaries and rates, New York teachers receive as much as \$5,880 a year when they retire with thirty-five years of service; and more if they teach longer.)

Nearly as important as these benefits to me was the sense of accomplishment I often felt in the classroom: the knowledge that I dealt with important things. To spend one's time with literature and history, even on the grade-school level, was satisfying; much more meaningful than many occupations in our complicated culture. Like most other young teachers in the city, I taught chiefly in the "difficult" schools: in slum areas where the children lived in dirty tenements, where the streets were strewn with garbage, where the only bright new things to be seen were television sets, saloons, and the automobiles of successful prize-fighters, dope-pushers, and policy-runners. Yet it was the very intellectual poverty of these children that often gave me the highest sense of accomplishment. When a twelve-year-old child never has learned to read, seen a painting, or heard the story of the *Odyssey* (how their eyes widened when they heard about the Cyclops!), it is possible to awaken in him the sense of wonder and awe that, Goethe says, is man's greatest inheritance. There was a boy who read nothing but comic books; then he listened to a retelling of *The Speckled Band*, and in one year read all the Sherlock Holmes stories, with *The Firm of Girdlestone* and *The White Company* thrown in. A social-studies class enthusiastically produced original newspapers dated at key points in American history. A little girl, illiterate, who never had been inside a museum before, stood

in front of Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* for fifteen minutes, and then turned to me when I came back looking for her and said, "Look, Mr. Shapiro, there's a dream that just busted."

There were, of course, many problems; lessons that didn't come off, an overcrowded school (the last year I taught in New York we had twice as many children as the school was designed for, and were operating on triple session), an enormous turnover in the teaching staff, the ever-present threat of delinquency. But by and large the public school provided a reasonably secure and not very demanding way of life, and one from which it was possible to derive some personal satisfaction.

Why did I quit? Why did I leave the school system to take a job in a private college, without tenure, at a much lower salary, giving up in the process my right to a sabbatical leave and all the pension rights accumulated by eight years' service?

The real answer, in my case at least, was the sense I had of holding no status as a teacher, the feeling that the work I was doing was not really respected by many of the children, their parents, the school administration, or society in general. The schoolmaster in America has never been the awesome figure familiar to readers of Dickens, Kipling, or *Tom Brown's School Days*. From Ichabod Crane to *Our Miss Brooks*, the pedagogue has always been looked down upon with somewhat amused contempt by a great majority of the American people. He was somebody apart, outside the main stream of endeavor, somebody you played tricks on and never took very seriously. (Remember the teacher's gilded dome in *Tom Sawyer*?)

This pervasive attitude, encouraged by the teacher's apparent willingness to accept low wages and his failure to agitate for better pay, has resulted in the transformation of the teacher from the standard-bearer of our moral and intellectual tradition to the status of a drudge and maid-of-all-work. I have mentioned above that teachers are required to be in school

only thirty hours a week, of which they are on active duty for only twenty-five. But not all of those twenty-five hours are spent in intellectual work — in actual teaching. I have spent hundreds — thousands — of hours "patrolling" the halls, supervising the cafeteria, making out application for school lunches, bus and subway passes and dental treatments, chasing children out of latrines, issuing and collecting books, taking attendance, making truancy reports, looking at teeth, measuring eyesight, and giving, scoring, and recording the results of standardized achievement tests whose only melancholy result is to reveal the fact that a vast majority of the children in our school haven't achieved very much. Every one of these activities, and a swarm of others like them, is doubtless important, and needs to be done; but it is false economy to pile them all upon the teacher just because he happens to be there. No one would expect a surgeon to empty bedpans or a lawyer to take down the record of a trial in shorthand; but, for want of any other person to do them, innumerable jobs that really belong to doctors, nurses, clerks, or the family have been foisted onto the teacher. Surely, from the mere standpoint of business efficiency, it is a waste to train someone for five years in pedagogy and subject matter and then set them to policing school toilets several hours a week!

Along with this lack of professional standards of work went a hardly concealed lack of respect for the intelligence and the professional competence of the classroom teacher. There was much talk about "democratic administration" in the official publications of the city school system, but nobody ever asked the teachers for their ideas or opinions on educational policy. In my years in the schools I knew dozens of magnificent teachers, many of them not intellectuals or "cultured" at all, but people who seemed to have been born with the knack of making children learn something. Miss X, a slender woman with the softest imaginable voice who somehow

made sure that every one of her second graders knew how to read and write (with "ink pens") at the end of their year with her. Mrs. Y, a formidable woman of sixty armed with a ruler, before whom the biggest boys in the school quailed — and learned the rudiments of arithmetic. Mr. Z, an energetic history teacher who, against all the rules, gave lectures to his class and made them like it. But none of these people, who knew more about teaching than the professors of Education in the teachers' colleges, were ever asked about teaching methods or the curriculum. "They," "the people at the Board," armed with the latest brand of "psychological research," labored mightily for a year or two and then showered all the schools with the newest product of progressive pedagogy. One year it was bundles of wooden sticks and red and blue poker-chips — millions of them! — to replace the multiplication table and "give the children a sense of learning by doing." Another year it was a series of readers, so arranged that children could be taught to read without the boring and "unlifelike" process of learning the alphabet. Yet again it would be a revised social studies curriculum, according to which students were to spend weeks on "Orientation to School," "My Family," and "Our Neighborhood," while ancient history was resolutely dropped from the course of studies altogether.

Along with these directives (which the older, wiser teachers simply ignored—they had seen so many of them come and go!) came absurdly dull readers about Dick and Jane, with their sterilized, immaculate lives; watery-barley history texts, drained of all intellectual content and written in a style that was an insult to the English language; the insistence upon keeping dull and bright children of the same age together, so that reading periods (with three or four "groups") were turned into a buzz of meaningless noise; and the general assumption that the classroom teacher, despite her dozen courses in "Teaching Methods" and "Educational Psychology," really didn't

know the first thing about her trade, and could not be trusted to practice it independently. (Imagine a doctor with twenty years' experience periodically being sent pamphlets which tell him how to take a pulse or chart a fever!)

This pervasive lack of respect for the teacher comes flagrantly to mind in incident after incident. I recall the time when because of overcrowding, I shared my room with another teacher; he took a photograph away from a boy who had been looking at it rather than his lesson, and I inadvertently threw it away in cleaning out my desk. The boy's father came to school, violently angry; after upbraiding me before the class, he threatened to (and did) "take the matter up with the principal; and if he won't help me, I'll go to the assistant superintendent." Nobody reprimanded or fired me, of course, but the incident made me feel like a stupid and rather lowly hireling. So did one principal's habit of coming into classrooms uninvited and unannounced and making random remarks about the lesson, the condition of the room and its decorations, and my own competence as a teacher.

Still more significant and revealing was my first (and last) encounter with one of the city's magistrates who deal with juveniles. In rehearsing a play to be given for an assembly (it was Norman Corwin's delightful little fantasy about a caterpillar who could dance to the music of "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby"), I took my class down to the auditorium. We had just begun to go through the opening scenes when a member of what Mr. Toynebee calls the "internal barbarians" strolled in with studied insolence, sat down near the stage, and began to make obscene remarks about the play and various members of the cast. I asked him to leave, and when he sneeringly refused, I threw him out bodily and went back to rehearsing. When I left the school an hour later he was waiting for me with ten or twelve teen-age members of his gang; only the accidental presence of the assistant principal made it possible for

me to get on a bus and go home in safety.

For my own protection as well as for the principle involved, I was urged to bring charges against the boy; he was a graduate of our school and our records showed a long record of truancy and misconduct. He was enrolled in the nearby high school, and should, in fact, have been attending classes there at the time he came to our school to act as a volunteer drama critic. When I met him and his mother in the magistrate's chambers he was quite unterrified, and I soon discovered why. The judge (a woman), after reading over the record, obviously regarded me as the culprit. Didn't I know that schools were public property and that children of sixteen were citizens entitled to their use? Didn't I know that the school law forbade the use of physical punishment? Did I make a habit of maltreating children who were so much smaller than myself? Why hadn't I called a policeman when the boy refused to leave the auditorium? After an uncomfortable quarter of an hour, the magistrate turned to the boy and his mother, admonished them to be sure he attended his own school regularly in the future, and dismissed us both. That boy and his gang never troubled me again, but I am sure the incident made both of us feel that teachers were rather inferior beings, entitled to little obedience and no respect at all.

There is no need to belabor the point or to give additional illustrations of it; any experienced teacher in New York could cite a dozen examples taken from his own experience of the low regard in which teachers are held. Despite his importance to society (he deals directly with one of the gravest problems confronting every modern, industrialized nation) and the increasingly desperate shortage of people entering his profession, the schoolteacher is not respected by most Americans and has even lost a great deal of his self-respect.

What can be done about it?

In the first place, it seems clear that the appropriation of vast sums of federal money (always the first reaction when anything

needs to be done in America) is not and will not be the solution. More buildings, better salaries, and the improvement of education in those states where the tax base is simply not big enough to finance an adequate school system, are all important steps and may eventually be taken when the situation gets bad enough; but money won't solve everything. New York, one of the wealthiest of states, spends an impressive amount per child on its school system, yet some of its problems are so acute and some of its failures so spectacular that they have made newspaper headlines a dozen times during the past year. I might add that some of the most polite and best educated children I ever taught came from some of the poorest regions in the country—the rural South. All of my public school career was spent in Harlem, and I frequently admitted children to my classes who had recently arrived in the city from Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, and Georgia. Almost without exception they knew the multiplication table, knew how to read and spell, and could write in a legible hand, achievements by no means universal among our own students. (Many progressive educators believe that a child should be allowed to print his work until he expresses a "felt need" to learn penmanship; and I have known college sophomores who are still doing it!) The Negro teachers in segregated schools, underpaid, often unlicensed because they lacked the proper number of education courses, working under the gravest handicaps, had somehow succeeded in doing what New York's vastly more expensive system often failed to accomplish. Desegregation of Southern (and Northern) schools is both inevitable and desirable, but I hope that in the process those devoted Negro teachers whose students I have so often admired do not lose their jobs, their sense of dedication, or their mastery of teaching the fundamental subjects.

Federal aid, desirable or not, seems a long way off. Can anything be done right away, without great expense, to improve

the status and the efficiency of our teachers? One plan worth trying is the transfer of as many non-teaching jobs as possible to non-teachers. Nurses or specially trained clerical help might well take over all the details of health examinations and the keeping of medical records. An additional clerk in each school could handle the issuance of books, lunch and bus passes, and the keeping of many of the records that now take up so much of the teacher's time. There is no good reason why the annual city-wide examinations, which are now laboriously graded and checked by hand, cannot be scored by IBM machines. More important still, the city school system might imitate the action of the police department, which has very nearly solved its manpower problem by hiring women on a part-time basis to supervise traffic around the schools at nine, twelve, and three o'clock, thus freeing thousands of men for work that is more directly in their own line of duty. Perhaps these same women, in their police uniforms, could be hired to come inside the school and supervise the halls and the cafeteria, thus releasing teachers for classroom instruction. A sober investigation of these and similar possibilities ought to make it possible to divest the teacher of many of the extraneous and irrelevant little tasks that keep her from doing the job for which she was hired. The result would be a saving of energy and money, and would help restore some of the sense of professional dignity that is lost when teachers are required to do clerical or monitorial or janitorial work.

A second practical step, already initiated in New York City, is to do away with the universal promotion scheme and restore the older system of leaving back some children and permitting others to "skip" one or more grades. The "100% promotion plan," introduced in the city schools in the 1930's, was perhaps the most unfortunate legacy of the Kilpatrick misinterpretation of John Dewey's philosophy. In order to avoid "frustration" or "maladjustment," each child was automatically promoted

along with his age-group, no matter how disobedient he was or how little he had learned during the school year; this curious custom of rewarding sloth and incompetence, so unlike the practice of any healthy society, was, astonishingly enough, called part of a "life-adjustment" plan. The zealots who introduced this reform pointed, with considerable indignation, to those few cases of ten- or eleven-year old children sitting in second and third grade classrooms because they had not yet learned how to read; but the remedy they sponsored has proved worse than the disease. Promoting these "slow-learners" (an officially-approved euphemism which covers the dull, the disobedient and the emotionally disturbed) every year, while it makes them less conspicuous, does not really solve the problem they present, and creates others far more serious. Today these children who are unable to read or write reach the upper grades and even receive junior-high school diplomas without ever having earned them. The value of that diploma is cheapened thereby; those students who could accomplish more if placed under pressure see no reason to work for a reward which they will receive anyway; and the entire atmosphere of the school is adversely affected by the presence of hundreds of children in so-called "adjustment" classes. How many years I have spent trying to teach twelve- and thirteen-year-old children how to read, write, and multiply, knowing all the while that I would have to promote them even if they failed to learn!

While we promote the dull student, and set up special classes with fewer children in them for the "slow-learner," we penalize the bright by keeping them in the same classes with children of average intelligence and forcing them to spend twelve years on an education that they could complete in eleven or ten. The resultant waste of our most valuable natural possession — the brains of the top five or ten percent of the children in our schools—is covered up by cant phrases about the dangers of "social maladjustment" and the values of "enriched

curricula." I am convinced that a great improvement in our educational system, and a simultaneous saving of money, could be obtained by breaking the educational lockstep; by letting bright children advance as fast and as far as their ability will take them, while permitting, encouraging, or requiring those teen-agers who cannot profit from further schooling to leave the school system. There is nothing sacred or untouchable about the present compulsory education law, and I have known several cases of boys who were rebellious and unhappy in school who got jobs and became useful citizens as soon as they were permitted to do so. New York has already made a beginning along these lines, and the latitude permitted in dealing with individual differences of this kind should be steadily widened.

Numerous other practical changes that do not require extensive financial outlays suggest themselves. The average teacher ought not to be required to handle the seriously disturbed, rebellious children who population, but who take up an inordinate amount of her time and energy. The core curriculum, which requires a teacher trained in social science to give lessons in English or geometry, ought to be dropped in favor of classes organized along traditional subject-matter lines. Homogeneous grouping of classes ought to be extended so that all the children in a classroom can work as a group, and the brighter students be given undiluted doses of grammar, geometry and algebra, science, and foreign languages. The current Teachers' College nonsense about permitting the child to set his own pace and decide what he wants to study should be conveniently forgotten (no intelligent teachers ever paid much attention to it anyway). Our laboriously constructed readers, put together by hacks who consult the Thorndike Word Lists for each grade, can be replaced by books that are literature, that are worth reading. (One does not know whether to be amused or enraged by the pedants who wanted to re-

write Mother Goose because such words as Little Miss Muffet's "tuffet," "curds," and "whey" were not on the first-grade word list). If we are to have business education on the high school level, let us make it real, and actually teach prospective secretaries and bookkeepers how to type, take shorthand, spell, write grammatical English, and handle numbers easily and correctly. We need more students who can speak foreign languages, who know something about the rest of the world, and who do not, like so many of the soldiers with whom I served overseas, simply classify every foreigner they meet as a "gook." None of these revisions of the existing system would be expensive to adopt.

The changes I have suggested, significant as I believe they are, will seem inadequate to those who expect an immense and immediate improvement in our school system, who point to the superficially impressive achievements of Soviet education and ask us to emulate or even duplicate Russian methods. We have, doubtless, much to learn from schools in the Soviet Union, and even more from those in Western European countries like Sweden, France, and Switzerland. The American tradition and experience, in education however, has been one of federalism and local control, and no massive reorganization of our system along centralized, authoritarian lines seems possible or desirable. In the last analysis, it seems to me, we must rely more than we do on the oldest and most enduring institutions of our society—the home and the family. If we can somehow encourage parents to take up once again the role that the most intelligent among them have never really dropped; if we can persuade all of them to read to their children, to take them to museums, to teach them to care for their medical and dental needs, to teach them self-respect and respect for others, then our schools can drop much of their preoccupation with extraneous matters and once more attempt to become what they ought to be—transmitters of the intellectual heritage of Western man.

The dignity of the teacher vs. the public-address system.

Big Brother in Our High Schools

MANICIPULUM

THE OTHER DAY, some of us men teachers got rather scared. Perhaps a dozen of us had gathered in the Men's Smoking Room, where usually the physical education instructors, the athletic coaches, and the manual arts teachers hang out. (They are the ones who can afford a brief respite, during luncheon period; for they do not have to mark test papers, compositions, or book reports. Their style of conversation, by the way, is characterized by primitive if not offensive four-letter words rather than the more academic phrases.)

Someone had raised the question of the male's sexual capacity, within a circumscribed span of time. Within a short while, lewd anecdotes and jokes had succeeded proffered theories on the comparative individual and general prowess of the male, within our biological and social framework. A popular instructor in woodwork, to the accompaniment of gusty laughter, was sounding off with an eminently low-down story when "the loudspeaker" asked if a certain member of the staff was in the room.

For a moment there was silence, and a modicum of consternation was clearly written over the faces of the men; for the voice which had asked the information was that of the vice-principal's number-one assistant, a buxom red-head who wears her luscious hair in opulent and ostentatious bedroom fashion. Definitely, the popular young woman's voice had been ringing with laughter. Had she been listening in? Had perhaps any other women of "the office" also shared in the fun?

Theoretically, one might think, these women should attend to their paper work. It is none of their business to intrude into the privacy of man's conversation, during the latter's brief moments of relaxation. But if they did? Let us say, they had not wanted to; but in turning on the "control system," they might have caught a few choice tidbits of male unrestraint. How many of them could resist the lure of a free audition, a spicy entertainment for which American tourists in Paris are willing to pay a steep price?

Someone among the stunned teachers said, "I wonder how much she has heard before she burst in on us."

Another, eager to recapture our carefree-