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*Scapegoating the Teachers*

(1983)

THE most common response to the current crisis in education has been to assail public school teachers. Not only are they incompetent, goes the charge, but good people have abandoned or are shunning the teaching profession. Teacher competency tests, which have spread during the past five years to some three dozen states, have produced embarrassing results in many districts; for example, when a third of Houston's teachers took a competency test, 62 percent failed the reading section and 46 percent failed the mathematics section (and the scores of hundreds of other teachers were ruled invalid because of cheating). Those who major in education in college tend to have below-average grades in high school and lower scores on their SATs than the already depressed national average (in 1982, the national average on the SAT verbal was 426, while the average for those planning to major in education was only 394).

This state of affairs has prompted a plethora of proposals. Some call for merit pay, others for increased salaries across the board. To some reformers, the answer lies with the designation of master teachers or with the promotion of

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more doctorate degrees in educational practice. Still others argue that the teacher problem would be ameliorated by abolishing schools of education.

The problem of teacher competence is serious, since there is no chance that the schools will improve unless the teachers know more than the students do. Yet the rush to attack teachers for the ills of public education smacks more than a little of scapegoating. Teachers did not singlehandedly cause the debasement of educational standards, and their preparation is better today than it was twenty years ago, when test scores began to fall. Though we now look back to 1962-63 as the golden age of student achievement, these years coincided with the publication of two major critiques of teacher education, James Koerner's *The Miseducation of American Teachers* and James B. Conant's *The Education of American Teachers*. Teachers, it seems, can't win: When scores go down, they are to blame; when scores are high, they get no credit.

It is comforting to blame teachers for the low state of education, because it relieves so many others of their own responsibility for many years of educational neglect.

- Why not blame the colleges and universities for lowering entrance requirements, thus undermining high school graduation requirements? Why not blame them for accepting hordes of semiliterate students and establishing massive remedial programs, instead of complaining to the high schools that gave diplomas to the uneducated?
- Why not blame businesses and employers, who set up multi-million-dollar programs to teach basic skills to their workforce instead of telling the public, the school boards, and the legislatures that the schools were sending them uneducated people? Why didn't representatives of major employers—like the telephone company and the banks—join forces to demand improved education?

- Why not blame state legislatures, which quietly diluted or abolished high school graduation requirements? Why were they willing to pile on new requirements for nonacademic courses (drug education, family life education, consumer education, etc.) while cutting the ground away from science, math, history, and foreign languages?
- Why not blame the press, which has been indifferent to educational issues, interested only in fads, and unaware of the steady deterioration of academic standards until a national commission captured its attention?
- Why not blame the federal government, which has toyed with the curriculum and introduced programs, regulations, and practices that narrowed the teacher's professional autonomy in the classroom?
- Why not blame the courts, which have whittled away the schools' ability to maintain safety and order? (In 1983, the New Jersey Supreme Court invalidated evidence that students were selling drugs in junior high, because the drugs had been illegally seized in one student's purse and in another student's locker—the court's decision that the students' right to privacy outweighed the school's obligation to maintain order nullified the school's obligation to act *in loco parentis*.)\*
- Why not blame state education departments for tolerating inferior teacher education programs, for imposing certification requirements that force students to take vapid education courses, and for burdening teachers and local school boards with a mountain of bureaucratic regulations?

With so many guilty parties still at large, it should be clear why almost everyone seems eager to pin responsibility

\* The New Jersey decision was reversed by the Supreme Court in 1985.

on the teachers for the bad news about the schools. The reality is that teachers should be seen not as perpetrators of the deleterious trends in the schools, but as victims of them. As teaching conditions worsen, it is teachers who suffer the consequences. When judges rule that disruptive youths cannot be suspended, it is teachers who must lock their classroom door and worry about being assaulted.

Just as serious as the problem of teacher competence is the state of the teaching profession. Some teachers insist bitterly that teaching is no longer a profession, but has been reduced to a civil service job. Other professionals are subject to entry tests and to supervision by senior professionals, and they usually retain a large measure of control over where they work and how they perform their duties; in teaching, governmental agencies and policymakers have bureaucratized hiring practices, curriculum development, student evaluation, and other areas that once engaged the experience and participation of teachers. The effort to make schools "teacher-proof" ends by making the teachers technical functionaries, implementing remotely designed policies. With so many laws and regulations and interest groups on the scene, wise teachers look for protection to the rulebook, their union, their lawyer, or to some job with more dignity. For the person who simply wants to teach history or literature, the school has not been a receptive workplace.

In response to declining enrollments and worsening working conditions, the number of people who want to be teachers has dropped sharply over the past decade. The number of undergraduate degrees awarded in education reached a peak of 200,000 in 1973, when they were 21 percent of all bachelor's degrees awarded in the nation, but dropped to only 108,000 in 1981, fewer than 12 percent of all bachelor's degrees awarded. The tight job market has meant not only a decline in the number preparing to

teach, but a decline in the ability of those who want to teach. Apparently the brighter students were smart enough to pick another field, and the flight of academically talented women to other fields has particularly depressed the quality of the pool of would-be teachers. The low starting salary for teachers is undoubtedly a factor in shrinking the pool: A college graduate with a bachelor's degree in mathematics would get a starting salary in teaching of about \$13,000, while the same person would receive about \$17,000 as an accountant in private industry.

The outlook for a better pool in the future is not very promising. In the fall of 1970, 19 percent of college freshmen said that they wanted to teach in elementary or secondary school. By 1982, less than 5 percent of college freshmen expressed the same ambition. Less than 2 percent wanted to teach in high school, a choice that was doubtless informed by their own recent observation of the life of high school teachers.

Would reforms in teacher education help the situation? For years, critics of education have heaped scorn on schools of education and on the required education courses that prospective teachers must take. Thirty years ago, critics like Arthur Bestor and Mortimer Smith charged that entry to the teaching profession was controlled by an "interlocking directorate" made up of schools of education, bureaucrats in state education departments, and teacher associations, and that the hurdles these groups erected (such as "Mickey Mouse" courses in educational theory and methods) excluded talented people from the public schools. Since the early 1950s was a time of baby boom and teacher shortage, nothing much came of the grumbling, and the agencies of certification and accreditation are, if anything, even more powerful today.

Students preparing to teach take most of their courses outside of the undergraduate education department. Would-be high school teachers take about 20 percent of their

courses in education, and would-be elementary teachers take about 40 percent of their courses in education. Some of these courses are valuable; others are not. Some are required by state education departments without any evidence that they contribute to better teaching. On most campuses, the education department is viewed with contempt by others in the institution, and it attracts the weakest students.

Even though education majors take most of their courses outside the education department, it would be preferable if there were no education majors at the undergraduate level, if every would-be teacher majored in some subject or combination of subjects. As matters now stand, the 108,000 bachelor's degrees in education awarded in 1981 were divided up among students preparing to be elementary teachers (35 percent), physical education teachers (17 percent), special education teachers (13 percent), and teachers of such specialized areas as home economics, vocational education, prekindergarten instruction, and health education. Less than 3 percent of the education degrees went to secondary teachers, which suggests that those who want to teach in high school take their baccalaureate degree in the subjects they want to teach and get their education credits on the side or in graduate school.

Elementary teachers need a wide preparation, since they will be teaching reading, writing, mathematics, science, social studies, art, and music. But they can take the courses in how to teach these subjects to young children while majoring in a discipline or combination of disciplines. The case for requiring physical education instructors to major in a subject area is even stronger, because a large number of them teach their minor subject (usually social studies) and end up as high school principals.

Since prospective secondary teachers rarely major in education in college, they do not get counted or measured by the researchers who examine the quality of the teaching

pool. In most studies and government reports, statistics are gathered only for those who major in education in college. Thus the numbers that are tossed about refer *only* to those who are academically weakest. In fact, when we are warned about the onrushing tide of incompetent teachers, we are hearing only about the coaches, the school nurses, the elementary school teachers, and the shop teachers, but not the would-be teachers of history, the sciences, English, and mathematics. We should still be concerned, particularly about the low academic ability of those who are supposed to teach young children the basic skills and impart to them their attitudes toward learning, but we should recognize that the data are biased.

Graduate schools of education have shown little interest in training teachers. Some professors and programs involve themselves with the public schools, but most of these institutions emphasize research and the training of educational administrators. Because they are parts of universities, their concept of status derives from the traditional academic model. They have low status within the university, which considers the graduate school of education little better than a vocational school.

Yet the graduate school has a useful role to play. In particular, it cares about education, which is one of the major social and economic activities in the nation. This sets it apart from the rest of the university, which tends to look down upon any interest in or involvement with the public schools. In the summer of 1983, however, the presidents of Harvard and Stanford met with leading university presidents and their education deans to discuss how to help the schools and how to overcome the traditional snobbery that has kept the "ed" schools out of the academic mainstream. Whether this resolve is translated from rhetoric into programmatic commitments remains to be seen.

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Perhaps a personal note at this point will explain my own bias. In 1972, when I had been out of college for a dozen years, I decided to get a Ph.D. in history while writing a political history of the New York City public schools. I approached a young history professor at Columbia, who told me that I was a bad bet for his department: "You have three strikes against you," he said. "First, you are a woman; second, you are more than ten years away from your B.A.; and third, you are interested in education." At Teachers College, the graduate school of education at Columbia, none of those characteristics was considered a handicap, and I pursued my studies there. This lack of interest in elementary and secondary schooling and in education as a profession and as a research field is typical of major research universities.

The present crisis in education and the depressed condition of the teaching profession offer an unusual opportunity to reassess our present arrangements for preparing teachers. As Gary Sykes, until recently the National Institute of Education's specialist on the teaching profession, has observed, the profession needs both "screens and magnets," ways to keep out incompetent teachers and ways to lure in the highly talented. The traditional screen—state certification—is almost entirely ineffective, since it guarantees only that a prospective teacher has taken required courses and received a degree. Recognizing that a college degree today certifies very little, a number of states have begun to adopt teacher examinations and to reassess their requirements for entry into the profession. If school boards and state legislatures were to raise their hiring standards—to insist that new teachers have an undergraduate major other than education, for instance, and to determine whether the education courses they require are valuable—the message of the marketplace would be heeded by institutions that prepare teachers.

Developing magnets to attract good people to teaching will be far more difficult. It must involve better pay, so that a life of teaching is not equivalent to an oath of penury. It may or may not involve some form of salary differentiation for teachers who win the respect and admiration of their peers, but some salary incentives should be available to keep gifted teachers in the classroom. It should involve generous public fellowships to underwrite the education of those willing to commit themselves to the classroom for several years. It should mean a readiness by school boards to provide teachers with opportunities for continuing intellectual and professional growth. It should mean a flexibility by teachers' unions to permit the employment of graduate students in science and mathematics, college-educated housewives, and professional writers to meet critical shortages on a temporary or part-time basis. It requires a willingness by education officials to defend the teacher's professional autonomy and to preserve a climate in the schools that honors teaching and learning.

The development of teaching as a profession will also require a reconceptualization of the school as a workplace, so that excellent teachers help novices, colleagues work together as peers, and superb teachers earn as much as administrators. Until teachers have as much responsibility for their working conditions as college professors do, professionalism will remain out of reach.

As with every other educational program, the difficulty of attracting top-flight people to teaching will not yield to simple solutions. Demography contributed to the problem; smart people looked for other jobs as enrollments declined. But demography may help ease the problem, as enrollments begin to grow again, increasing the demand for new teachers. The opening of other career opportunities has shrunk the talent pool, but teaching will continue to be an attractive occupation for those who wish to combine a career with family responsibilities.

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As a mass, public profession, teaching will never offer salaries that compare favorably with those of law or medicine, but it does offer satisfactions that are unique to the job. In every generation, there are people born with a love of teaching. They want to open the minds of young people to literature, history, art, science, or something else that has seized their own imagination. To recruit and hold on to such people, the nation's schools must not only reward them adequately but must provide the conditions in which good teaching can flourish. That will not come about through public incantations; it will demand realistic programs and imaginative solutions. But a nation that has led the world in popular education for more than a century owes it to itself to meet the challenge.