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Some Impressions of Quality Teaching

The purpose of the set of observations reported here was to try to identify common characteristics among teachers who are considered by their principals to be outstanding. As an essential part of the study, an effort was made to determine the reasons why the teachers were rated highly by their principals, the extent to which principals agree on the characteristics which they value in teachers, and the degree to which the teachers subscribe to the same philosophy of education as the principals.

Procedure

Twenty secondary schools of established reputation were visited by two members of the staff of the Faculty of Education of McGill University. Ten of these schools were in the Quebec Protestant school system and ten were in the Eastern United States. In each school, the principal was asked to name two of his best teachers and to state the main reasons why he considered them to be among his best. These teachers were then observed for a full teaching period and were rated on a five-point scale for five different aspects of their teaching. At the end of the lesson, the teacher was asked by the McGill observers for a statement of what he thought to be the main aim in teaching.

The five points on which the teachers were rated were as follows:

1. Pupil-teacher relations (pleasant atmosphere, interest, sense of purpose)
2. Attention to needs of groups or individuals
3. Achievement (realization of a valid aim; profitable use of time)
4. Encouragement of thinking, creativity, imagination, good study and work habits
5. Evidence of values related to good citizenship and worthy personal standards.

Performance of Quality Teachers

From the visits to the forty classrooms, it became apparent that the most obvious characteristic of quality teachers was their mastery of subject matter. Not only were the teachers completely at home in presentation, explanation, and discussion but they exhibited a lively interest in ideas in general. This enabled them to emphasize the full significance of their work by the skillful organization of material into units. It also gave them a clear sense of aim, helped them to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, and enabled them to use their time in class to full advantage. Textbooks were used frequently by the pupils to support their position in discussion; however, there was no feeling that the teacher was dominated by the textbook and many outside references were introduced. The combination of subject mastery and sense of direction gave these teachers confidence in their work and this in turn was reflected in the attitude of the pupils. The competence of the teachers in their subject matter also enabled them to use questioning most effectively. Their perception led them to ask highly significant questions, to use question sequences skillfully, and to detect in the pupils' answers the possible points of misunderstanding or indefiniteness. Questions were used not merely to review material but to promote growth through the probing of relationships and the drawing of conclusions.

The mature outlook and sense of balance of these teachers was also apparent. Their enthusiasm for their subject and for teaching was obvious but this did not lead to their excessive domination of the class. Instead, the teacher was frequently in the background, guiding rather than directing the work of the class. There was excellent full-class teaching with wide and eager participation on the part of the pupils. Learning was usually carefully reinforced by enthusiastic response to good answers, by frequent encouragement, and by a minimum of censure, rebuke, or outright rejection of poor answers. The class worked hard but with a sense of accomplishment and enjoyment.

On the other hand, many of the accepted techniques of teaching were not practised by these teachers. For instance, most of the lessons opened without any obvious introduction either in the form of recall or of statement of objective. There was little or no change of phase, many of the lessons being almost entirely discussion or seatwork periods. Similarly, scant use was made of summaries at the end of the period or of the usual reinforcing devices of building blackboard outlines, highlighting of pivotal questions, or even note preparation. The blackboard and other teaching aids were seldom used except in mathematics classes. Also, there was a

general absence of individual assignments and small group work. This raises the intriguing speculation whether these teachers, who were acknowledged to be good, might not have been even better if they had employed the proven pedagogic techniques.

Analysis of Quality Characteristics

The numerical ratings assigned by the two observers proved to be surprisingly close in most instances. While no reliability is claimed for these ratings, it may be assumed that they revealed comparative strengths and weaknesses among the various teachers and an analysis of the overall data obtained would suggest the following conclusions:

1. Apparently, principals tend to think their male teachers are stronger than their female teachers. Of the twenty outstanding teachers selected by the principals in the American schools, thirteen were men; of the twenty in Quebec, fourteen were men. All the principals were men. The teacher scoring highest in the numerical ratings given by the observers was also a man. On the other hand, (both in Quebec and in the United States) the average rating for the women who were observed was slightly higher in each of the five categories than the average rating for the men.

2. From this sampling, it appears that the best teachers are frequently teachers of English. Of the twenty in the American schools, seven were teaching English, three mathematics, three history, three biology, and one each in physics, chemistry, French and art. In Quebec, five of the twenty were teaching English, four mathematics, three chemistry, three Latin, two physics, and one each in geography, biology and French. No conclusions were drawn from this distribution but it seems to suggest that there may be some operative factor which would lead principals to select from one-third to one-fourth of their best teachers from among those who teach English.

3. After the visit to the classroom and the rating of the teachers on the five categories, each teacher was asked to state what he thought to be the single most important aim of teaching. Many protested, quite rightly, that they combined a number of aims in their work. However, in stating their aims they either named their most important objective or they indicated priorities. Their answers were processed by a content analysis technique into three categories: those which gave priority to knowledge and skills; those which stressed the importance of developing thinking, creativity, and appreciation; and those which emphasized the importance of the development of the ethical and moral values of the pupil either as an individual or as a citizen. These range roughly from

traditional to the so-called more progressive attitudes towards education.

In the American schools, only two of the twenty teachers said that their aim was to impart knowledge or develop skills; eleven (over 50%) selected stimulation of thinking and creativity as their goal; and seven (over 33%) chose the development of values. The Quebec statements differed from the American pattern. In Quebec, fourteen (over 66%) chose thinking and creativity and the remainder stated that they were teaching for knowledge and skills; none indicated a prime interest in moral or ethical values.

As might be expected, teachers tended to exhibit strengths which were related to their stated aims. In the American schools, six out of the seven teachers who felt that it was important to develop moral or ethical values rated higher in this aspect of their teaching than the average mark scored by the twenty teachers. Of the eleven who taught for thinking and creativity, seven rated higher than the average in this regard. It is interesting to observe, however, that the remaining two who said they taught mainly for knowledge and skills were less successful than the average even in this goal, possibly because their objectives were too narrow.

Among the Quebec teachers, the same general evidence was found. Of the fourteen who taught mainly for thinking and creativity, twelve rated higher than the average in this aspect of their teaching, and of the six who taught mainly for knowledge and skills, only three were higher than the average in this part of their work.

To generalize from the above, it appears that the teachers who work towards the more intangible goals tend to rate higher than the average good teacher in achieving these aims, and they also do well in teaching knowledge and skills; those who primarily attempt to develop knowledge and skills achieve only moderate results even with these more limited goals and have relatively little success in teaching towards thinking and personal values. This would seem to suggest that there may be a highly significant relationship between the teacher's conscious aim in teaching and his success.

4. After the teachers had been observed at work and had been rated, the principals were asked to state the single most important reason why they had selected these teachers as their best. Their answers were also analyzed and again were separated into the three categories under the general headings of proficiency in imparting knowledge and skills, of encouraging thinking and creativity, and of striving for the development of personal, ethical or moral values.

In the American schools, seven principals identified the teachers' success as being mainly in imparting knowledge or skills, seven as developing thinking and creativity, and six in the fostering of personal values. It might be noted that the principals tended to be

somewhat more "conservative" in their statements than their teachers. It is more significant to realize that the statements of the principals coincided in thirteen out of the twenty instances with those of the teachers. This could mean that there is a tendency for the teacher to excel in the areas approved by the principals or, conversely, for principals to select as their best those teachers who achieve what they themselves look for. It is of interest that in the majority of cases, there was agreement between the principal and his staff — suggesting the importance of the school's philosophy in directing the outcome of the teaching. One further point which emerges from a study of the statements is that, in those American schools where the aims of the teachers and the principal did not match, the teacher's statement was in each case the more inclusive or "progressive." Possible explanations for this might be that the principals were either somewhat older than their teachers or that, as administrators, they had become overly conscious of success in terms of marks.

The Quebec situation was less clear cut. In eleven instances out of the twenty, the principals selected their teachers for their ability to impart knowledge or skills, in five for promoting thinking and creativity, and in four for their interest in developing personal values. In nine out of the twenty cases, the principals' statements coincided with the teachers' aims. However, in Quebec, five of the principals seemed to be looking for something more progressive than the teachers were and, in the remaining six cases, the teachers said they were trying to do something more than the principal seemed to expect. This still means that fifteen of the twenty teachers — that is, 75% — were either teaching as the principal would expect in terms of his own philosophy or were less "conservative." Once again we find a preponderance of agreement and note the possible significance of the school's philosophy in directing methods and outcome of instruction.

Summary

1. Teachers identified by their principals as outstanding were characterized by mastery of their subject matter, enthusiasm for their work, and good rapport with their classes.
2. The observations suggest a positive correlation between the teacher's stated aim and his success. However, teachers who said that they taught mainly to impart knowledge and skills were less successful than were those who worked to develop intellectual, social and personal values in their pupils.
3. In most cases, the principal's philosophy of education is shared by the better teachers on his staff; where it is not, the teacher tends to have the more inclusive or "progressive" objectives.