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Are We Too Busy To Think?

A curious quality of education is that... few study it in any serious way at all. In our hurry to purvey or consume it, we pause infrequently to question what we are up to. We are alternately too brash and reactionary and always, it seems, too busy to decide which and why. More importantly, we are too caught up with pressing numbers and immediate crises to decide what we should be doing in the first place. So we stumble on, giving and receiving schooling without full reflection on the truly sophisticated and ethically loaded practice it involves.

The words are those of Theodore Sizer, Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. They are words that should be pasted on to the desk of every teacher, every principal, every supervisor in the land — and if the desks of these individuals tend, like mine, to become so cluttered that such a message is likely to be buried, perhaps a better place for it would be the mirror that we peek at each day in order to ascertain that the face and hair that we are going to present to the world are reasonably acceptable.

I write as a former elementary school principal and a current coordinator with the P.S.B.G.M. I know only too well how easy it is to be engulfed by the minutiae of day-to-day operations — of meetings and phone calls, of interviews with parents and erring children, of central office communiques and unwashed dishes in the staff kitchen. The unhappy result of such an engulfment is that we move from crisis to crisis without any clear idea as to where we are going. Rather, the goal is simply to try to keep one's head above water.

Classroom teachers are, of course, at least as much beset by the same difficulty. On their shoulders rests a multitude of responsibilities: to keep the wheels of learning turning, to see

that Johnny is referred to the nurse, to get those requested returns into the office, to think of an idea suitable for tomorrow's art lesson, and so on, and so on.

But to yield completely to such pressures is to behave in a manner that detracts from the professionalism that we claim. Certainly there can be no denying that the conscientious teacher (and I include assorted hangers-on such as myself in that designation) is beset each working day by a multitude of chores to be performed. To lose oneself completely in such a maelstrom is, however, to forfeit the sense of perspective that all teachers should rarely, if ever, be without.

I still remember vividly the autumn day of my first year of teaching when the provincial inspector paid his initial visit to my classroom. He must have sensed that I was the victim of the type of crisis-oriented behaviour pattern to which I have referred for, after my ill-served youngsters had departed the classroom for more exciting pursuits, he gave me the benefit of some sage and fatherly advice.

"You know," he said, "it's a good idea to catch your breath once in a while, to take a careful and critical look at what you are doing, to identify weaknesses and to see if there is anything you can do to convert these into strengths. You are now a member of a profession and, as a professional, you should develop the habit of self-evaluation."

It was a message that I have never forgotten and, while I do not apply it as often or as rigorously as I should, there have been occasions, and quite a few of them, when I have reflected critically upon the week just past and have attempted to think of ways in which I could have handled certain responsibilities and certain problems more wisely and more effectively.

This type of self-evaluation I commend to everyone engaged in any aspect of the educational enterprise. But such evaluations do not go far enough unless they include some attempt to incorporate what might be termed philosophical considerations. These should include the following:

What do I conceive of as real goals of education?

What am I trying to achieve in the name of discipline?

What am I doing to improve myself as a teacher?

Questions such as these lead one to the type of professional contemplation and study of education that Sizer had in mind. And surely, at a time when the critical spotlight of public attention is focused on public education in a way that it has never been before, we all owe it to ourselves, to the children

entrusted to our care, to parents, to members of the community at large and to our professional colleagues to make of ourselves "scholar teachers" — thoughtful practitioners of what is still the most potentially satisfying art of them all — the art of teaching.

The word "art" can, of course, be a little misleading, for teaching is not only an art — it is also a science, a science which rests on a body of knowledge so vast that no one person, regardless of how gifted or how diligent he may be, can master it in a professional lifetime. The vastness of the undertaking does not excuse our refraining from devoting the time, the energy and, most difficult of all, the thought to gaining some understanding of the disciplines with which every teacher should have some acquaintance.

What the foregoing represents, then, is a plea for professionalism — a plea for dedication, for scholarship and for thoughtfulness.

It is a plea that should evoke an enthusiastic affirmative from those teachers sufficiently concerned about their profession as to merit the accolade of professional.