

TEACHING AS A CAREER

I was six years old when I first decided to be a teacher. The reason was far from noble. I had fallen in love with Miss Wogstaff who was my class-teacher. I used to shyly offer her flowers and I was always the last out of the classroom, hoping against hope to be rewarded by one of her smiles. To me she wasn't a teacher, or even a person, but a goddess. She existed in a world apart—a world, I seem to remember, that was bound between the confines of a rather dingy elementary school in a dirty industrial town. She existed only between the hours of nine in the morning and four in the afternoon, from Monday to Friday. For a long time, I thought she spent the rest of her time locked in the large classroom cupboard together with the exercise books and chalk, emerging only to enchant me. During the following years I was to become disenchanted, not only by Miss Wogstaff who left one dark Friday afternoon, never to be seen or heard of again, but also by a succession of school teachers some of whom I hated, some I liked. But as I grew older, I began to wonder why this odd collection of grown up people chose to spend all their life in school. As a child, one had to. I could not imagine why this eccentric group of adults chose willingly to go to school.

Certainly it wasn't for the money. My teachers walked or came on bicycle or bus, never in their own cars. For some, life was one unending battle against forty ill-behaved children—and generally a losing one.

Why then, do presumably some people voluntarily choose to become teachers? Is it because they are not clever enough to do other work? This was suggested by George Bernard Shaw who commented: "Those who can, do; those who cannot, teach". And, a sad comment: in teachers' training colleges—'Those who cannot teach, teach others to teach'.

The reasons people take up teaching are varied, and very often the wrong ones. For example, any teacher will tell you how irritated he becomes *when* people say 'But what long holidays you have', and it is true that many people enter the profession for that very reason. It is an easy job with short hours and long holidays. Anyone who decides to become a teacher for this reason will soon become disappointed and disillusioned. He will also be a bad teacher. The actual teaching hours in the classroom are the easiest and the most enjoyable parts of teaching. A good teacher will do most of this work—the hard and often most uninteresting part—outside the classroom. The hours spent preparing lessons, making apparatus, marking books, going on courses and reading books in order to keep up to date—these hours, over a year, including so called holidays should be considerably in excess of the hours spent in the classroom. Nor is there extra pay for over-tim. Another reason which prompts some people to become teachers is a sense of power. How delightful to spend your life telling people—albeit rather young people—what to do. Never to be questioned or doubted; always to be obeyed. If this is your motive, forget it. In the first place it isn't so and in the second, you will certainly be a very bad teacher. It can be done and, regrettably, there are teachers who are little better than bullies. They would have been better advised to take up boxing or all in wrestling.

Several years ago I was interviewing prospective students for Kent College. One question I always ask was, "Why do you want to be a teacher?" Not any easy question to answer, but I was surprised by some of the reasons:— "Because my parents cannot support me". "Because I want to be a gentleman" (thus implying that a teacher does not dirty his hands or actually work for a living), "Because they would not take me in the Police".

If you are thinking about teaching as a career, perhaps, before I get down to details of how to do it, it might be useful to state my ideas of what a good teacher should be. Most important he (which includes she) should like children. And, make no mistake about it, children are not always likeable. They have colds and they snivel; they are noisy and often rude; they are often bad-tempered and naughty. In fact, they are rather like you and I — except there are forty five of them in a very small space. It requires patience and a saint-like temper. Furthermore, a good teacher will never think of his children as a class, but as forty five individuals, all of whom need and deserve his attention.

A good teacher will be fair and just. He will have no favourites (and it is impossible not to like some children more than others). He must never show this, however, because each child is equally important. Children have a tremendous sense of fairness and are quick to see when an injustice is done. They need to have faith and a sense of security in their teacher. Once this disappears the essential teacher-pupil relationship disappears also and the very real joy in teaching and learning disappear with it.

A good teacher will be humble. He will not set himself up as a superior being (even though if he is good, the children will think of him so) and will not be afraid to admit that he is wrong or that he doesn't know the answer to a question. Far from going down in the children's eyes, an answer such as, "I don't know the answer to that question; let's all try to find out by tomorrow morning", will help a teacher and really educate the children by making them find out for themselves.

A good teacher will be honest and encourage honesty in his children. By this I do not mean only honesty in the sense that he will discourage stealing and lying, but also in the broader sense of being honest in their thoughts and in their discussions. They will be encouraged to put forward their ideas and points of view even though theirs' may be different from the teacher's.

He will be conscientious and hard-working because if he is lazy and comes to school without preparing his lessons, the children will be restless and bored. He will then have to spend most of the time keeping the children quiet and far too little time teaching and guiding them in their works.

And a good teacher will not only like children but he will like teaching. To him each lesson will be alive and interesting. Like an actor, he must present his teaching in the most vivid and enjoyable way. In this way, he will communicate his enthusiasm to the children and school will become alive, alert, purposeful and, above all, enjoyable.

There are, of course, other qualities and some of you may be surprised that I have not mentioned cleverness, or academic ability. This is not because I consider it unimportant— obviously a teacher should himself be as well educated as possible— but because I do not consider academic ability by itself to be of very great importance. I can think of several teachers who, in terms of knowledge, could be considered brilliant, but because they are interested only in their subject, they are bad teachers. A good teacher does not teach Mathematics, English, Science, History, Geography, Art and so on— he teaches children. Conversely, I have known teachers of poor academic ability who were outstandingly good— particularly with lower primary classes. Simply because they had understanding, sympathy and an alive interest in children.

Don't be like the teacher who retired from the first school I ever taught in. He had been in that school for forty years and hated every minute of it. A friend of mine commented that instead of having forty years of teaching experience, he had one terrible year's experience forty times.

If you have become a teacher for the right reasons, you will find that each year brings greater confidence and experience and greater enjoyment. Although you may be teaching the same subjects, you will be teaching different children. On the other hand, if you have chosen teaching for the wrong reasons, life will be dull and boring, not only for you but for the succession of children who have the misfortune to study under you.

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VOLUME 6 1963