

IS TEACHING A PROFESSION?

By DAVID EARLE LEWIS

A friend of mine, knowing that I am a school teacher, cut out a cartoon from a magazine and sent it to me. It shows a radio blatting forth, in excited tones, the voice of a master of ceremonies on one of these so-called quiz programs. "Come on, now! You can guess the answer—he's one of the presidents of the United States...his initials are A. L...A...L... Some of his friends might have called him Ab...hah, hah! Come on, now Ab...Abra..... THAT'S RIGHT! Abraham Lincoln! And YOU'VE just hit our special grand jackpot of \$6,400 ".....and over in one corner of the cartoon, sits a woe-begone, pathetic little figure, with a bewildered and beaten look on his face. Underneath, the cartoonist has laconically printed—"History teacher, salary \$6,200".

Now it goes without saying that the cartoon is American. This is obvious for two reasons. One, the Americans are the only people who can stomach, yea, nurture, quiz programs. Two, only in the United States does a common-breed history teacher make anything approaching \$6,200 a year.

Thus to the Canadian, the joke is not complete and undiluted humor. There is an acidic, Rabelais quality to it. It sums up the Canadian-American attitude toward education much more succinctly than any article or debate could attempt. It underlines, with one grotesque sweep of the pen, the ignominious and ignoble position of the average teacher today.

What is the most pathetic factor of all is that fact that many teachers have little or no inclination to fight for their professional dignity, and lapse into the whining lethargy of self-pity. Too often teachers have allowed themselves to be castrated (along with the minister) by a society which demands a capon-role for them, simultaneously allowing themselves the liberties of healthy, if somewhat earthy, chickens. It is discreetly insinuated in our social code that a teacher cannot be a good teacher if he does not affect a self-effacing manner of living. And the teachers, under the pressure of "public opinion", accept this role, allowing themselves not infrequently to become public lackeys, burdened with all kinds of duties which they are made to feel is "part of their responsibilities".

This timidity carries over into the actual profession. Teachers will allow themselves to be intimidated by parents who

feel they have the perfect right to ride shipshod into the school, demanding considerations on the part of their children. These same parents would not consider for a moment to presume helping the doctor diagnose these same children when they are sick—let alone tell him what he should do professionally. And the same attitude of respect is seen toward the field of law. Thus we have the pathetic spectacle of teachers wailing to themselves that “teaching is a profession just the same as medicine and law, and should be on the same status”—and yet helpless to exert their prerogative, and demand respect from parents. If a teacher has not the ability to maintain his professional independence as an efficiently-trained expert, then he has no right to claim equality with those in other professions who can—and do. This does not insinuate for a moment that parents should have no contact with the school. On the contrary, the liaison between the two should be more fully cemented than it is—but it should be based purely on a constructive attempt to alleviate the problems of the children concerned, ALWAYS respecting the fact that in matters of the school, the teacher’s decision is the legitimate one.

There are many reasons why this meekness has come about. One of the most apparent is the fact that the average citizen’s contact with the doctor or lawyer in a professional way is usually based on a feeling of fear. With the doctor, the individual is in fear of his health; and with the lawyer, he is in fear of losing his security. But with the teacher, there is no element of fear. Too many parents who pass as averagely intelligent adults have no more conception of a teacher than that of his being a glorified baby-sitter. School is a place to send the kids through the day. True, they learn certain crafts, such as reading and writing. But the broader concepts of education and the role of the teacher in society is overlooked. Perhaps the reason is the materialistic age in which we are living. The teacher does not “make” anything—thus he is not very important, and logically, the plumber or the carpenter deserve higher salaries.

If one has any doubt as to the little concern that is given to the role of the teacher in our society, he has only to look at some of the products which these very citizens allow to teach in the schools without giving it a second thought. The fact that the teacher, next to the parent, is the most important influence in the formation of the child’s character is apparently of negligible importance. Unlike the professions of medicine and law, there are little or no requisites necessary to become a

teacher. This is due to the fact that the standard of salaries is so low that there is no choice. The schools must be supplied with teachers—and if the best ones keep leaving the province, then someone has to replace them. We have only to ask if this situation is comparable in the fields of medicine and law. It is highly improbable that any community would tolerate a “substitute” doctor who had not had any preparatory training of any kind.

Of course the question of salary is the pivotal one. Unless, and until, this is solved, nothing can be done to elevate teaching to the venerable place it should have in society. The minute a teacher shows defiance, and mentions the word “strike”, there is immediately great public slobberings in the press about the “ethics” of the profession. And the pathetic part of it is that many of the teachers are insecure enough in their own attitudes to believe this mouthwash. Medicine, even more than teaching, is devoted to the “good” of mankind, but there is nothing, apparently, in their ethical code to prevent them, at the same time, from making a comfortable living. Despite ANY argument of ANY kind, a teacher has as much right to earn a respectable living as any other member of our community, and, because of the nature of his contribution and training, that living wage has a right to be in the higher salary brackets.

If society has any pride or concern over its welfare, it should have more than a cursory interest in the type of individual that is allowed to teach. I am never at a loss to be amused—and amazed—at parents who will show great concern over the character of a baby-sitter, and who have never in their entire existence given a second thought to the quality of the teachers, who, in many cases more than themselves, mould the thinking and character of their own children. It is perhaps the most appalling observation on our present society that we, as parents, have not matured to the level where we comprehend the issues involved in the teaching profession.

This very laxity of letting anyone teach, either as a substitute or on a “permissive” licence, is the chief cause of the lack of unity among teachers. These people often do not look upon teaching as a profession. They are not the ones who have invested time, money and energy into extensive preparation for their role. They are usually the ones most prone to be intimidated by “public opinion”. And thus any attempt on the part of the teachers toward unity—and such strength as this unity would give them—is thwarted by numbers alone. Every year the situation becomes more aggravated, as our

trained teachers leave for more lucrative posts in other provinces, and their vacancies are filled as best they can be.

And the cure?

With a problem as intricate and involved as this one, the remedy is not a simple one. Yet at the moment little along the constructive line is being accomplished. Nova Scotia is being dotted with palatial schools, and it is true that the quality of teachers in these schools is high. But as the better teachers flock to these super-schools, they leave vacancies in schools which are not so "super".

The few teachers' preparatory courses given in the province turn out a small number of teachers each year, many of whom do not teach, particularly after the first year. Part of the remedy is to encourage more college students to enter the teaching field, but to do this necessitates guaranteeing them a salary comparable to that offered by other professions with an equal allure.

There should be more stringent requirements demanded for those entering the field through the devious routs of permissives. The blame for these teachers cannot be laid at the doorstep of the inspectors. They are doing a commendable job in facing a crucial problem. But it can be laid—and should be laid—fairly on the doorstep of a society which refuses to face its responsibilities toward education, and a government who treats the field of education as a purely mercenary concern—a problem of expenditure. Education is not a field which can be handled in a purely business-like manner. Schools do not turn out produce—they turn out future citizens. The government of this, or any other, country has no more sacred duty than that toward its future citizens. And all the carping and ostentatious attempts at diversion on their part does not hide the fact that their responsibility and duty in this respect has been sorely tried and found lacking.