

SEYMOUR B.
SARASON

YOU ARE
THINKING OF
TEACHING?

OPPORTUNITIES,
PROBLEMS, REALITIES

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opportunities,

problems,

realities

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SEYMOUR B. SARASON

The
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To Nathaniel Lee Sarason Feuerstein
Born March 8, 1993

May you come to know the difference
between knowledge and wisdom

preface

The central theme in *The Case for Change: Rethinking the Preparation of Educators** is that reform efforts have emphasized repair over prevention. *Emphasize* is too weak a word. What I attempted to do was to indicate what it would or could mean if we took the preventive orientation seriously in preparing educators. Many factors converged to motivate me to write that book, not the least of which was the fact, and it was and is a fact, that preparatory programs were inadequate in alerting students to the realities of classrooms, schools, and school systems. It seemed obvious to me that unless these programs better prepared students for those realities, reform efforts could not be expected to be successful. Long before I wrote that book, I was tempted to write a book in which I would try to sensitize prospective teachers to what life would be like for the professional teacher. It would be a book on the theme of "forewarned is forearmed." If I did not write that

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book, it was not for a lack of motivation or conviction. But as I wrote *The Case for Change*, I knew that I could and should no longer postpone writing that book, the contents of which have a long personal history. It was not an easy decision, for reasons I shall briefly discuss.

I resisted writing this book for fear that what I would say would be perceived as having an effect contrary to my intention—to portray to those considering a career in teaching a picture containing exciting opportunities to understand themselves, students, and our society. The source of my resistance was that those opportunities would be believable only if those contemplating a career in teaching knew the nature of the challenges they would confront. I long ago learned that too many people chose such a career abysmally unsophisticated about what they would be up against staying intellectually and professionally alive. Despite such a lack, some teachers had the courage and motivation to continue growing, learning, and changing. Too many teachers did not, and in saying that I intend no criticism whatsoever. The conditions for a productive, satisfying career require more than personal characteristics; they also require a social-intellectual-professional atmosphere in which those characteristics stand a chance to be expressed. What I found impressive were those instances where that atmosphere existed minimally or not at all but where individual teachers successfully sought to change that atmosphere. It took me too many years finally to “hear” what almost all teachers were telling me: “I wish I had been made more knowledgeable about and sensitive to the realities of teaching real kids in a real school. If I knew when I started a fraction of what I know now, I might or might not have chosen a career in teaching, but I would have

reacted to the realities in a better way.” One teacher articulated well something that for me had the clear, loud ring of truth: “It took me at least five years to overcome the tendency to regard myself as powerless to do anything to make my school an alive place. In my preparatory program, my instructors and supervisors—who were well-intentioned, sincere people—conveyed the impression that my major, even sole responsibility was to the students in my classroom. What was happening in the rest of the school was important *but none of my business* [her emphasis]. That, of course, was not true. When I had that insight, my whole outlook changed, and so did my role in the school. I helped change that school. I became a more happy teacher *and person* [her emphasis]. If I didn’t feel all-powerful, I certainly didn’t wallow in feelings of powerlessness. It wasn’t easy, but it has paid off.” That was said to me twenty-five years ago, long before the issue of the role of teachers in educational decision making gained currency. If it has gained currency, albeit far more on the level of rhetoric than in practice, the fact remains that today those who choose teaching as a career are inadequately sensitized to the problems they will confront and what *they* can and *should* do about them. That is a central theme in this book. It is a theme, a belief, that literally forced me to write this book. “Salvation” has its internal and external sources and conditions.

If I believe anything, it is that unless and until those who enter teaching have a better comprehension of what life as a teacher too frequently is, *and what it should and can be*, improving our schools is a doomed affair. Yes, other things have to happen, other changes have to be made. But unless teachers are better prepared to play a more active, even militant role in such changes, improvement will be minuscule. It is that belief that

permits me to emphasize in this book that those who today choose teaching as a career are doing so at a time when, individually and as a group, they can make a difference. No career other than teaching allows one as much possibility of meeting and coping with a threefold challenge: better understanding of oneself, others (students, parents), *and the society in which we live*. This is not an easy challenge. It is not for the fainthearted or those who view *the* teacher in *a* classroom as a desirable (or possible) monastic existence. It is a challenge that when understood and realistically confronted guarantees excitement, frustration, and personal-intellectual-professional growth.

What I say in this book to those contemplating a career in teaching can be put this way: "You may perceive what I say as coming from a pessimist who says the bottle is half-empty. I hope you will see it as coming from someone who sees the bottle is half-full and believes that you can increase its contents."

I have made no effort to cover the waterfront of issues and problems about which a person contemplating a career in teaching should ponder. And precisely because I am writing for such people, I avoid—at least I have tried to avoid—jargon, references to studies, and statistics. I have restricted myself to the confines of a conversational style, and within those confines to what I think I have learned that may be helpful.

I will be more than gratified if this book has meaning for two other groups: those who are currently in a preparatory program and those who are their instructors or supervisors. If what I have written is seen by others as incomplete or misdirected or wrong in some ways, and stimulates them to write their own books, I will feel that my effort was not in vain.

Acknowledgments

It is fair to say that a large part of what I say in this book is no more and no less than what teachers have told me. Over the decades, I have had many long, fascinating, instructive, candid discussions with teachers. It was those discussions that forced on me a truth we apparently have to learn again and again and again throughout our lives: Don't ever confuse what teachers (any people) say they think and feel with what they think and feel in the quiet of their nights. If in the past I have been critical of what and how teachers teach their students, I am delighted to be able to say that teachers have taught me a great deal about teaching, teachers, and schools. I must single out two teachers, now my friends, who "instructed" me well. One is Ed Meyer, who at great personal cost, but not at the expense of dearly held values and intellectual integrity, has been a constructive and persistent critic of the preparation of teachers. The other is Robert Echter, who helped me understand how keenly teachers feel the lack of collegiality in their schools, a sense of community they passionately desire but were not helped to think about or to assume the obligation to achieve.

And, of course, I am again indebted to Lisa Pagliaro, who continues to be able to read my handwriting. Why and how she does so continue to mystify me. In any event, I thank God for big favors in the form of Ed Meyer, Bob Echter, and Lisa Pagliaro.

This book is homage to a man who was the dearest of friends and a great and influential educator, and who in countless ways focused my interest and attention on issues in the preparation and lives of teachers. Each of the late Burton Blatt's teachers-to-

be knew the difference between passively accepting things as they are and the way they should and can be. And in knowing that difference, they also knew what their obligation was.

New Haven, Connecticut
June 1993

Seymour B. Sarason

the author

Seymour B. Sarason is professor of psychology emeritus in the Department of Psychology and at the Institution for Social and Policy Studies at Yale University. He founded, in 1962, and directed, until 1970, the Yale Psycho-Educational Clinic, one of the first research and training sites in community psychology. He received his Ph.D. degree from Clark University in 1942 and holds honorary doctorates from Syracuse University, Queens College, Rhode Island College, and Lewis and Clark College. He has received an award for distinguished contributions to the public interest and several awards from the divisions of clinical and community psychology of the American Psychological Association, as well as two awards from the American Association on Mental Deficiency.

Sarason is the author of numerous books and articles. His more recent books include *The Case for Change: Rethinking the Preparation of Educators* (1993), *Letters to an Educational President* (1993), *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform: Can We Change Course Before It's Too Late?* (1990), *The Challenge of*

Art to Psychology (1990), and *The Making of an American Psychologist: An Autobiography* (1988). He has made contributions in such fields as mental retardation, culture and personality, projective techniques, teacher training, the school culture, and anxiety in children.

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