

AMERICA'S TEACHERS

An Introduction to Education

Joseph W. Newman

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University of South Alabama



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America's Teachers: An Introduction to Education

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AMERICA'S TEACHERS

For Dorothy and Beth,
Corinne and Joe

Contents

Part I: Teaching as an Occupation	1
1 Deciding to Teach and Finding a Job	3
Motives for Teaching	3
Satisfaction with Teaching	8
Burnouts and Dropouts	9
The Critical Years Ahead	11
The Teacher Job Market	12
The Demand for Teachers	12
The Supply of Teachers	15
The Politics of Teacher Supply and Demand	16
Trends in the Job Market, Field by Field	18
2 Earning a Living and Living with Evaluation	25
Teacher Salaries, State by State	26
A Profile of America's Teachers	28
Comparing Salaries in Teaching and Other Occupations	30
Teacher Salary Schedules	32
Merit Pay: The Birth of "Sound and Cheap"	37
The Accountability Movement: Merit Pay Reborn	40

Behavioral Evaluation of Teachers	42
Career Ladders and Other Plans: Merit Pay, Latest Versions	43
The Second Mile Plan	43
Merit Pay Plans That Last	44
Career Ladders	45
Holmes, Carnegie, and a National Career Ladder	47
3 Learning to Teach and Proving Your Competence	53
The Content of Teacher Education	55
Liberal Education	56
The Teaching Field	56
Professional Education	58
Reforming Teacher Education	59
Holmes and Carnegie	60
The Texas Squeeze Play	61
The New Jersey Shortcut	62
A Tale of Two Occupations	63
Raising Standards in Teacher Education	64
Rediscovering Teacher Incompetency	64
Literacy Tests	66
Tests of General Knowledge, the Teaching Field, and Professional Education	68
Teacher Testing and Minority Teachers	71
Cautious Optimism about Teacher Education and Teacher Testing	73
4 Joining a Teacher Organization and Empowering a Profession	79
NEA and AFT	80
Collective Bargaining	84
Teacher Strikes	87
Political Action	88
A Teaching Profession?	90
A Unique, Essential Social Service	91
A Defined Body of Knowledge	93
Autonomy	93
Pressing toward Professionalism	95
Victory for the NEA in Nevada	95
Breakthrough for the AFT in Rochester and in Dade County	97
Undercurrents of Opposition	98

5	Exercising Your Rights and Fulfilling Your Responsibilities	103
	Employment	104
	Contracts	104
	Tenure	104
	Dismissal	105
	Due Process	107
	Liability	108
	Injuries to Students	108
	Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect	109
	The Teacher and AIDS	110
	Educational Malpractice	112
	Expression	113
	Academic Freedom	113
	The Teacher's Right of Public Dissent	115
	Other Forms of Expression	116
Part II:	Schools and Society	121
6	History of American Education	123
	Debates and Patterns	123
	Historical Interpretation	124
	Common School Reform in Historical Context	125
	District Schools, Academies, and Other Schools	126
	The Impact of Modernization	128
	Debates over Common School Reform	131
	Politics	132
	Morality and Religion	133
	The Triumph of Common Schools	135
	Progressive School Reform in Historical Context	136
	Modernization Accelerates	137
	Liberal and Conservative School Reformers	138
	Debates over Progressive School Reform	138
	Assimilation for Immigrant Children	139
	The Middle Course of Pluralism	140
	Separation for Black Children	141
	Progressive School Reform in Perspective	145
	Twentieth-Century Patterns of Education	146
	Competition for Control of the Schools	146
	The Local-State-Federal Balance	148

	The Quest for Equal Educational Opportunities	149
	Trends in the Curriculum	150
7	Philosophies and Theories of Education	157
	“Why” Questions	157
	Four Philosophies	158
	Idealism	158
	Realism	159
	Pragmatism	160
	Existentialism	160
	Theories of Education: An Overview	162
	Perennialism	163
	The Great Books	163
	<i>The Paideia Proposal</i>	164
	Essentialism	166
	William C. Bagley and the 1930s	167
	The Academic Critics of the 1950s	168
	Back to Basics in the 1970s and 1980s	169
	Progressivism	172
	Children, Society, and Their Problems	174
	Progressivism in the Classroom	175
	Social Reconstructionism and Critical Theory	177
	Life Adjustment	178
	Blaming Progressivism for the 1960s and 1970s	179
	Progressivism Today	180
8	Sociology of Education	185
	Social Class	186
	The American Social Structure	187
	Sorting and Selecting in School	187
	Families, Peer Groups, and Schools	190
	Ability Grouping and Tracking	191
	Race and Ethnicity: An Overview	193
	Black Students	195
	Desegregation in Historical Perspective	195
	De Facto versus De Jure	197
	Urban School Desegregation	198
	Academic, Social, and Economic Effects of Desegregation	198
	Busing	200

Magnet Schools	201
Hispanic Students	202
History and Demographics	202
The Controversy over Bilingual Education	203
Models of Bilingual Education	204
Gender	206
Sex-Role Socialization	207
Unequal Treatment in the Classroom	208
Title IX	209
Cognitive Differences between Females and Males	210
 9 Politics of Education	 217
Local Politics of Education	218
Local Boards and Local Superintendents	218
Local Board Members: Demographics and Representation	221
Local School Board Elections: At Large or by Districts?	222
State Politics of Education	224
Legislatures, Governors, Superintendents, Boards, and Departments	224
Excellence in Education: The States Discover School Reform	226
The Politics of More of the Same	228
Federal Politics of Education	229
Federal Money and Federal Influence	231
The Cold War, the Poverty War, and Other Battles	232
Mr. Reagan Comes to Washington	234
The Economic War, the Moral War, and Educational Advocacy	236
Educational Finance	238
Local Property Taxes: Some Districts Are More Equal Than Others	239
State Funds: Reducing the Inequalities	241
Educational Finance in the 1990s	244
 Part III: Issues for the 1990s	 251
 10 Teachers and the Curriculum	 253
Back to Basics and Testing, Testing, Testing	254
Outputs and Inputs	254

What's Wrong with the Schools?	256
The Measurement-driven Curriculum	258
The Children of Lake Wobegon	259
Curriculum Alignment	260
Essentialism for the 1990s	262
Getting the New Basics into Place	262
Going to School with James Madison	263
The Madison Curriculum and Its Critics	264
The Great Literacy Debate	265
Toward a More Sophisticated View of Literacy	266
<i>The Subtle Danger</i>	266
Cultural Literacy	268
The Critics Respond	271
 11 Private Schools versus Public Schools	 276
The Three Sectors of Private Elementary and Secondary Education	277
A Profile of Private Schools and Their Students	278
Roman Catholic Schools	280
The Issue of Academic Achievement	280
Functional Communities and Value Communities	282
Human Capital and Social Capital	282
Fundamentalist Christian Schools	283
Inside Fundamentalist Schools	283
The Struggle against Secular Humanism	285
Private Schools and the Government	287
State Regulation	287
Tuition Tax Credits	289
Educational Vouchers	290
 Index	 295

PART I

Teaching as an Occupation

CHAPTER 1

Deciding to Teach and Finding a Job

MOTIVES FOR TEACHING

Talking with prospective teachers about why they want to teach is an excellent way to begin a discussion of teaching as an occupation. For more than ten years I have asked the students in my introduction to education classes to write down their major motive for teaching. Comparing their responses with the results of similar surveys conducted around the nation, I see several clear patterns. Why do you want to be a teacher? Almost certainly you can give several reasons, but try to narrow them to just one: your major motive for wanting to teach. Now compare your response with those in Table 1.1. If your motivation centers on *students*, you have plenty of company. With remarkable consistency, about half the prospective teachers in my classes link their desire to teach directly to young people. If *academics*—the love of a particular subject or of learning in general—prompts you to teach, you are also in good company. Approximately one-fifth of the future teachers in my survey have academic reasons as their major motive. Surveys conducted throughout the nation show the same patterns: student-centered motives almost always top the list, with academic motives usually running a distant second place.¹

Other motives for teaching (and the rounded percentages of my prospective teachers who put them in first place) include *job advantages* (10%), the *social value* of teaching (10%), and the *influence of other teachers* (5%). These patterns, too, are consistent with the results of other surveys. The brief statements quoted in Table 1.1 are representative of the ways in which future teachers summarize their motives.

TABLE 1.1. WHY DO YOU WANT TO BE A TEACHER? MOTIVES OF PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS

-
1. Students
 - "I love children."
 - "I like working with young people."
 - "I want to help students."
 2. Academics
 - "I enjoy a particular subject."
 - "I love learning."
 3. Job advantages
 - "I like having my summers off."
 - "My hours as a teacher will match my children's hours in school."
 - "Teaching is a good job for people on their way to something else."
 4. Social value
 - "Teaching is society's most important job."
 - "I can improve society by teaching."
 5. Influence of other teachers
 - "Some of my teachers helped me so much, they made me want to teach."
 - "Some of my teachers hurt me so much, they made me want to teach."
-

(Sources: This profile is based on my ongoing survey of prospective teachers at the University of South Alabama and on J. Marc Jantzen, "Why College Students Choose to Teach: A Longitudinal Study," *Journal of Teacher Education* 32 [March–April 1981]: 45–48; Cassandra L. Book and Donald J. Freeman, "Differences in Entry Characteristics of Elementary and Secondary Teacher Candidates," *Journal of Teacher Education* 37 [March–April 1986]: 47–51; and National Education Association, *Status of the American Public School Teacher, 1985–86* [Washington: NEA, 1987], pp. 55–58.)

Considered as a whole, studies of motivation pay future teachers genuine compliments. Teachers are altruistic; they want to help. Most of them enter the occupation with the welfare of others in mind, and they believe they can make a difference in their students' lives. Some prospective teachers have been helped—or in a few cases hurt—so much by their own teachers that they feel motivated to teach. Some extend their concern for others to society as whole. Now notice what the surveys do *not* say. People do not go into teaching for the money—with good reason, as we will see in the next chapter. Nor do people choose teaching for the prestige. Americans respect teachers, but it is a peculiar respect—the kind accorded to outsiders, to people set apart from the mainstream of society.²

Can we take what prospective teachers say about their motives at face value? Aren't some of their statements too good to be true? Based on my work with future teachers, I am convinced that their altruism and idealism are real. But based on what they say outside of class, informally and off the record, I am also convinced that the perceived advantages of the occupation pull more people into teaching than the surveys indicate. Notice the job advantages listed in Table 1.1. Teacher education students often joke that "teaching has three main benefits: June, July, and August." Of course the summer vacation is attractive, but should it be someone's major reason for wanting to teach? Prospective teachers

who admit that it is, along with others who are reluctant to confess, should consider that some school systems have already moved to a year-round schedule and the summer break is closer to 10 weeks than to 12 in most systems. Taking graduate and inservice courses during the summer further reduces time off for teachers. So does "moonlighting." Fourteen percent of teachers work an evening or weekend job outside their school systems during the school year, and 19 percent have outside employment during the summer.³

Another perceived advantage of teaching is the daily schedule it offers. As more nontraditional (age 25 and older) students, many of them women, go to college to pursue the degrees they did not obtain when they were younger, more students talk frankly about choosing a career that will allow them to spend time with their own children. As a parent I can appreciate this motive, but should it be first on a prospective teacher's list? Although the nontraditional students in my classes usually have realistic expectations for the occupation, they often underestimate the demands that teaching will make on their time during the evenings and weekends.⁴

Finally, there is the perception that teaching is a good temporary job for people who have other career and life plans in mind. As one student told me recently, "I want to be a lawyer, but I think I'll teach for a while. After all, teaching is easy to get into and easy to get out of." Actually, this is an old notion. Historical studies going back to the colonial era show that some teachers (mostly males) have used the occupation as a stepping stone to other careers, while other teachers (most of them females) have used it as a way station en route to marriage and family.⁵

Americans view teaching as women's work. The feminization of the occupation began in the mid-1800s as school boards turned increasingly to women to fill teaching positions. Females had two advantages over the males who had dominated the occupation earlier: the character and personality of women were regarded as better suited to working with young children, and women constituted a cheap, reliable labor force. These nineteenth-century perceptions are with us still. Today women are 69 percent of all teachers and 86 percent of elementary school teachers, and the percentages are even higher in areas of the nation where highly traditional views of sex roles prevail.⁶

"I love children." Since prospective teachers choose these words so often to express their motivation for teaching, we would expect employed teachers to reflect the same sentiment. But the evidence is curiously mixed. Contemporary and historical studies of teachers' letters and diaries reveal few discourses on loving children. Instead, teachers discuss how demanding teaching is, or they focus on matters unrelated to their work. In the letters and diaries, teaching comes across mainly as a job, something people do for economic survival. Yet for a century and a half, society has been sending women the message that they should teach because they love children. They should *want* to be teachers—obviously not for the money but for the children. It is almost as if women, trying hard to please by saying what society expects, have repeated "I'm going

to teach because of the children” so often that they have come to believe it.⁷

Perhaps this discussion is too harsh. Teachers *should* care about students, and the evidence suggests that most of them do. When asked why they stick with their demanding jobs, most teachers answer, “the students.” What gives teachers their greatest intrinsic satisfaction? They reply, “reaching the students.”⁸ For convincing evidence of how student-centered teachers are, read the “People” section of almost any issue of *NEA Today*, a newspaper for members of the National Education Association (NEA). “I genuinely like and respect young people . . . and look for the best in them,” says a 14-year veteran. “I encourage them to stretch in reaching for their goals.” A teacher with 21 years of experience puts it this way: “I do love teaching. I’m working with these kids who want to learn, and telling them about the world, and getting paid for it!” A teacher whose career spans six decades (!), a veteran with “no qualms about using the word *love*,” says the best teachers “exult when children succeed—and bleed when they hurt.”⁹

Admittedly, teaching is no job for people who do not care about young people, but personal concern is not the only quality that teachers need. A logician would say that caring about students is a necessary but not sufficient qualification for teaching. The job involves interpersonal skills, but much more. Teachers who enter the occupation motivated solely by their good feelings can be bitterly disappointed when students do not return their affection. To be blunt, some students do not want your love. Think twice about becoming a teacher just because you care.

Also reconsider if you believe you will be teaching students whose socioeconomic backgrounds are similar to yours. A demographic profile of prospective teachers shows that they are overwhelmingly female, middle class, and white. More than 80 percent grew up in suburbs or rural areas and want to return to teach students like themselves. Only 9 percent—and the percentage is shrinking—want to teach in big cities, where teacher shortages are often acute. As we will see in Chapter 8, the demographic profile of America’s students is strikingly different. One in four students is from a family living in poverty. Twenty percent of students are in large school districts with enrollments of more than 40,000. By the turn of the century, as many as 40 percent of the nation’s students will be black, Hispanic, or Asian—yet the percentage of prospective teachers who are minorities is decreasing, as Chapter 3 points out.¹⁰

These trends suggest a serious and increasing mismatch between America’s teachers and their students. We will return to the changing demography of teachers and students in other chapters, but the point here is that future teachers are increasingly unlikely to find jobs teaching Dick-and-Jane kids. Instead, more teachers may find themselves identifying with “Here I Was, a New Teacher,” a moving account of a teacher’s first year in the New York City schools, published in the June 22, 1988, issue of *Education Week*.

Future teachers not only need to consider the kind of students with whom they will be working; they need to think seriously about the kind of work they