Uniting Forces to Improve Education

Column Editor: H. Gordon Hullfish

Teaching Aides—An Educative Opportunity?

IN A recent column[1] Benjamin Fine took note of the controversy that has existed ever since the Central Michigan College of Education, with the assistance of a grant from the Fund for the Advancement of Education, initiated "the teacher aide" experiment. In characteristic fashion, he presented the situation as a reporter would view it. Those involved in the program (including the community of Bay City, where the major work has been done) approve it. The profession, especially as this is represented, according to Fine, by "officials of the National Education Association, and the heads of some teachers colleges," do not.

The fact is, of course, that under the conditions of the "experiment" classes have been enlarged, from 25 or 35 to 45 or 55. On the face, keeping an educational concern to the fore, this would appear to be about the worst possible way to deal with the problem of teacher shortage, the problem to which this undertaking is addressed. Yet the reports from Michigan, as presented by Benjamin Fine, suggest that students, parents and teachers find the plan good. And presumably the aides, the non-professional helpers who receive about one-half the salary paid the regular teachers, find it good, also.

It may be that those who are caught up in the enthusiasm a new undertaking always engenders are too close to the activity to be able to evaluate it. It is equally possible that the critics are too far removed to see it fairly, either in its potential or in terms of the developing practices. These critics have suffered long, first, as they have watched class size mount beyond all reason and, second, as they have struggled against long odds to advance both salary levels and professional standards. They could hardly be expected to look with favor upon an undertaking which, though it deals with a problem about which they are deeply concerned, the shortage of teachers, promises, from their perspective, to subvert the advances made on each front.

It is unfortunate that the situation has taken the turn it has. Forces which might unite to seek a needed solution to a problem we must not fail to solve are settling into opposing camps. Under these circumstances *experimentation* may turn out to be, for those on either side of the controversy, no more than an obscuring blanket to cover practices which are fully approved before "experimenting" is undertaken.

It ought not to be necessary to argue that the notion of introducing aides into the classrooms of the country is worthy of serious consideration. All who have had experience within a modern hospital know how necessary the aide is to its efficient operation. The aides in the hospital make it possible for nurses to engage in the business of *nursing*. It is conceivable that aides in the classroom would make it possible for teachers to engage in the business of *teaching*. Nurses and patients, and the institution, the hospital, have been helped by the development of dif-

[1] "Education in Review," *New York Times*, December 9, 1956.

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fering orders of aides. One may speculate, admitting that the analogy is not perfect, that teaching aides would work to the advantage of students and teachers, and of the institution, the school.

If we were to start with this hypothesis, however, we would not know in advance that an aide program would make possible the employment of fewer teachers. We would not know in advance that increasing numbers of students could be assigned each classroom. We would not know in advance what the source of the aides should be. We would know only that an hypothesis, that aides could be useful in improving *the total teaching situation*, seemed good enough to warrant the effort to check it out. If in the process of checking, an increase in class size were discovered to be educationally sound, the matter could be argued in terms of supporting evidence. But so, too, if the evidence suggested this, could the reduction of class size be argued.

Speculation need not stop at this point, however. The heads of some teachers colleges, according to Fine, have objected to the aide program launched in Michigan. The objections, of course, have been to a specific program. If they have been more than this they have been groundless. What seems surprising, upon reflection, is that teachers colleges have not taken the lead in experimenting with aide programs. They might have thought they could help solve the problem of teacher shortage through the use of their students. They might have been expected to view such an effort as an opportunity to bring to life for their students the professional programs they have been at pains to develop.

All who teach prospective teachers must be depressed frequently as the realization dawns that their enthusiasms are not shared by their students and that their clear insights set down no roots within the students' lives. It is relatively easy, of course, to slough off these depressing moments by agreeing with one's colleagues that students are not what they used to be or ought to be. One can then await the day when the better student will come along or, being ever resilient, one can concoct a scheme for engendering enthusiasm or, more ambitiously, create a pattern for the rooting of insight.

Is it not possible that what the student needs is not an elaborate network of courses, designed to entrap him within professional interests, but direct experience within professional activity that, apart from an external design, will nurture his intellectual capacities as he seeks to solve problems he has faced? Is it not possible that the use of the student-in-preparation as an aide-in-preparation (a

pre-professional aide, not a non-professional aide) will facilitate the development both of the student and of the teacher education program? Is not one reason why present courses often seem deadly to the student their failure to illuminate any problems of which he is aware or about which he is concerned? May it not be that his failure to generate a questioning attitude in courses is, simply, a lack of the experience needed to ask questions?

Given the need of the students in teachers colleges, and given the need of the public schools to secure more help in dealing with the increasing numbers of students, would not an effort to develop pre-professional aides be worthy of consideration? Why not have students spend their third year (or a quarter or a semester within this year) in full residence in public schools as pre-professional aides? Could not the public schools and the teachers colleges thus unite in a shared undertaking, holding the hope that their effort would improve both the immediate situation and the long-range professional program? Could not the experience of the pre-professional aide become as integral a part of the professional curriculum as student teaching is, and an excellent preparation for it?

We do seem to be in danger of tossing aside a promising idea because a particular formulation of it can be seen to lack merit. The teacher aide idea ought not to be tortured in the interest of economy alone. But the fact of this torturing, where it occurs, should not obscure its potential value as an educative tool which, if properly used, may move us well along a desired road, the improvement of professional performance.

—H. Gordon Hullfish, *professor of education, The Ohio State University, Columbus.*

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