

HERBERT E. ROBB

Don't Blame the Teachers

Ever hear this before? "Of *course* our students are ignorant; their teachers are incompetent!"

Actually, not all teachers are incompetent—only about 10 percent,[1] which is considerably less than the 33+ percent of teachers who are dissatisfied with their jobs.[2] Certainly, incompetency and burnout are real problems, but let's not blame teachers for all of education's ills. Instead, we might try concentrating on developing more meaningful curricula, something useful to students; something they might find psychologically satisfying and pragmatically motivating that could transcend the differences between "good" and "bad" teachers. Were students to value *what* they are taught, *how* they are taught would become secondary to their own will and interest in learning.

We require students, during their most physically and mentally formative years, to sit in classrooms month after month, day after day, hour after hour. Their senses are dulled, their bodies restricted. They may occasionally be involved in worthwhile discussions and interesting projects, but for the most part their education consists of a written and oral transfer of words—from teacher, textbook, and worksheet to student and back again to the teacher. Students don't want to reply or discuss or listen. They have become anesthetized, tired of notes, words, and tests, of all the passive, dull, verbal experiences that relate students only minimally to the world outside their cell-like classrooms. As the words, words, words pile up over the years, more of our youth will "burn up" as more of our teachers "burn out."

Are we willing to change all of this? Or are *we* anesthetized by our fear of change? Would we, for example, be willing to begin a national apprenticeship educational system for all adolescents? That would mean placing our youngsters, say above the age of 12, on farms, in factories, in corporate offices, in labor union training programs, and in special governmental services where they would learn by doing and acquire basic occupational skills—not just a few visiting field trips, but active field work experiences. Farfetched? It is only farfetched that we have never seriously considered doing so. We have become far too entrenched in our classrooms where teachers are overseers.

A limited version of this suggestion already exists in New York State's Board of Cooperative Educational Services. But it could be carried much further and connected directly with the economic and industrial forces of society. We could still give students the language, literature, science, math, history, and cultural education they need, but connected to active life experiences. We would not abandon the basic skills but relate them to occupational skills. Students, understanding the place of those skills in their lives, would obtain a greater sense of self-responsibility in an economically difficult world.

Unless we are prepared to initiate such a change, I foresee a doomed outcome. Already there are many citizens who would end or reduce funds for public education, who feel that education is not a right for all but a privilege for the elite who want to learn. Learn what? The Three Rs and subjects taught within the context of the existing curricula. Frankly, I doubt that most citizens have thought about any real overhaul of education, much less about implementing change. Today's demands seek little more than to restrict budgets, dismiss teachers, return to the basics (which were never abandoned), and test teachers for competency.

If we *really* want public education to serve our youth and society, that education must become a functional, active part of students' lives. Once we have rescued our youth from apathy and hostility, we will find satisfaction and "competency" restored to our beleaguered teachers.□

[1]"Poll Shows Teachers Dissatisfied," *The New York Times*, July 15, 1980, Education Section, C1–C4.

[2]Ibid.

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