

## The Teaching Decision

### Arthur Ellis (used by permission)

*“The effort made in this country to spread instruction is truly prodigious. The universal and sincere faith that they profess here in the efficaciousness of education seems to be one of the most remarkable features of America. . . .”*

*--Alexis de Tocqueville, a letter to a friend, 1831*

The word *education* is generally considered a common component of the vocabulary of most people. After all, people know what *education* is. Or do they? A person undertaking a study of the many areas of education soon finds that it is quite a complex subject. It is at once concrete and theoretical. It is linked both to public policy and to individuals' hopes and dreams. It can involve people, money, ideas, buildings, methods, knowledge, and a host of other factors—depending on who you talk to or in what particular context you are considering the subject. An unfocused study of the many aspects of education can have the same effect as an attempt to find one's way through a bewildering maze.

We will look at education with a fundamental question: why teach? We will sift through some of the personal motivations affecting the decision whether to teach or not to teach. A recent survey of U.S. teachers conducted by Louis Harris for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company indicated that love of teaching is the most powerful force that keeps teachers in their jobs. Harris found that teachers are "a dedicated group of professionals anxious to improve the educational system."

However, the survey also indicated that teachers face a serious set of challenges: overcrowded classrooms, student apathy, inadequate school funding, and discipline problems. Here is how teachers responded to the following statements:

#### Strongly/Somewhat Agree

I love to teach.	96%
I would rate my school as excellent or good.	91%
I have to spend too much time on administrative tasks.	72%
I am usually recognized for good performance.	70%
As a teacher, I feel respected in today's society.	47%
The training and preparation teachers receive today does	46%
A good job preparing them for the classroom.	45%
I would advise a young person to pursue a career in teaching.	45%
My job allows me the opportunity to earn a decent salary.	37%

What kinds of inferences can you make about the data from this survey in terms of teaching as a lifetime career? Of course, not everyone who decides to become a teacher remains one. The Second Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll of Teachers' Attitudes toward the Public Schools, taken in 1989, revealed a number of reasons why some teachers choose to leave teaching. Here, in order, are the reasons they gave:

1. Low teacher salaries
2. Discipline problems in schools
3. Low status of teaching as a profession
4. Students are unmotivated, uninterested in school
5. Lack of public financial support for education
6. Parents do not support the teachers
7. Outstanding teacher performance goes unrewarded
8. Difficulty of professional advancement
9. Parents are not interested in children's progress

What inferences can you make about a teaching career from these data?

## **WHY TEACH?**

### *Public Opinion*

The average person can give a number of reasons why teaching is or is not a particularly good career. Do you believe that? Just ask the average person. Find someone outside the teaching profession (a reasonably easy task since teachers make up only 5 percent of the adult American population), and ask him or her to give you several reasons why teaching might or might not be a good career to enter. You might be given encouraging reasons such as the following:

- You would be helping young people to learn.
- You get summers off.
- People respect teachers.
- Teaching is difficult, but rewarding.

Or you might well be given discouraging reasons, such as:

- The pay is low.
- Jobs are scarce.
- Teaching is just for people who can't do anything else.
- Discipline is too much of a problem

Now ask this same person to tell you about architecture as a career, or about journalism. Ask this person about another field or two-political science or computer theory-if he or she has not walked away by now.

Possibly you are wondering why we would place an exercise such as this at the beginning of a book which treats such a "solemn" topic as education? The answer is simple. We wish to illustrate an important point: *everyone* has opinions about education, even people who know next to nothing about other professions. Education is public domain. The educator holds a public trust. The person who would become a teacher assumes the deepest set of responsibilities a society can bestow upon a

human being. As E. F. Schumacher wrote in his book *Small is Beautiful*, "the task of education would be, first and foremost, the transmission of ideas of value, of what to do with our lives." *What to M with our lives*. How many other professions have had such words written about them?

To give you a sense of both a professional view and the public's perception of the importance of teaching and the contributions of teaching to the general good of society, consider these results, again from a recent Gallup Poll: Public school teachers ranked teaching as the number one contributor to the wellbeing of society. The public also registered its support of teachers, ranking teachers number three, just behind clergymen and medical doctors, and *ahead* of judges, lawyers, business executives, bankers, and other professionals.

*"But when the American hears the word "schoolteacher" ... the image will be something like this: ... She stands in his mind on the borderline of childhood, urging, beckoning, exhorting, patiently teaching, impatiently rebuking a child in whom the impulse is strong to escape the narrow bounds of the schoolroom."*

--Margaret Mead

## *You, the Teacher*

Perhaps, rather than asking the question "Why teach," we should ask the question, "Why should *you* teach?" There are undoubtedly as many reasons for being a teacher as there are people who teach. And, undoubtedly, some of the reasons are not particularly good, or at least do not sound particularly idealistic. Nevertheless, while a reason such as "I love children" may sound good, it may or may not be as important to you as another type of response, such as: "I think it is a career in which I could succeed." It is difficult to make value judgments about an individual person's motivations.

Let us examine some possible responses from the hypothetical "average person" we interviewed.

- *You would be helping young people to learn.* What do you think of young people? How does one person help another person to learn?
- *People respect teachers.* Do you respect teachers? All teachers? What is respect anyway? What about students who refuse to do homework or parents who do not respond to notes from the teacher--do they respect teachers? How important is respect? What about self-respect?
- *Teaching is difficult, but rewarding.* What are some of the difficult aspects of teaching? What is rewarding about it?
- *Teaching is just for people who cannot do anything else.* Is this professional jealousy? Do all people feel this way? Is teaching a profession of incompetents? How do you change the way people think about discipline?

Obviously, some of the statements made by our hypothetical "average person" are true of the teaching profession and some represent misconceptions. Some of the statements are true for some teachers and not true for others. Your own responses to the related questions can help you separate fact from fallacy and can help you understand your personal motivations in deciding 'to teach.

Personal motivations for choosing to enter the teaching profession can be based on a number of different types of reasons. For example, you may have altruistic reasons for wanting to become a teacher--you may want to commit yourself to service to the community, you may have a strong rapport with children, or you may have a love of learning that you want to share with others. In addition, you may have some practical reasons for wanting to teach--you may feel that it is a solid career or you may know that you can be hired easily.

Other sections will illuminate concepts of teaching and education as well as dispel some widely held myths. Your answer to the question "Why teach?" can then be based on acquired knowledge as well as on introspection.

*"When I became a teacher... It was important to sort out the romance of teaching and discover whether, knowing the problems, the hard work and frustration, it still made sense to teach. For me, the answer has been yes, but there are still times I wish I'd chosen some easier vocation."*

*--Herbert Kohl*

## **Society and Teaching**

Much of what human beings need to know is not genetically programmed; rather, it must be taught. Each person must acquire anew his or her own culture. Throughout history, educational arrangements have always been made for the young. These arrangements have varied from highly formal academic experiences to informal life skills experiences. Only in recent times, however, have schools become a worldwide phenomenon. The formalized learning experience for nearly all young people is largely a twentieth-century invention.

How a person acquires the skills, knowledge, and values necessary for survival and prosperity varies considerably from one society to another. Further, the foundations of a person's education cannot, of course, be viewed apart from the goals of his or her society. A case in point is that of the high school dropout in our society. Having completed, let us say, the tenth grade, he or she is reasonably well educated by world standards. But we in the United States brand dropouts as failures because they did not earn a high school diploma. Yet approximately 35 percent of our young people do not complete high school.

## **Function and Purpose: Two Great Controversies**

Over time, some basic purposes of education have evolved. There is-and will continue to be-the debate between those who feel that the basic purpose of education is to serve the individual and those who feel that the basic purpose of education is to serve society. Ours is one of the few societies to place the individual first, with the thought that individuals well served will serve society well.

There is widespread agreement that education ought to serve several functions. Those functions are intellectual development, character development, moral and/or religious training, and citizenship training. The range and depth of the school's responsibility for these four functions has become an object of great controversy.

## **WHO TEACHES?**

In the past, and in a few cultures of today, parents, elders, priests, and wise men have taken on the teaching role. These people have seen it as their duty to instruct the young in the areas of knowledge, skills, and values. Aristotle wrote that the surest sign of wisdom is a person's ability to teach what he or she knows. Whether the teaching/learning process is informal, as it is in many preliterate cultures, or whether it is highly formalized, as it is in our culture, everyone agrees that the young must be taught by those who know.

Since that time in the dim and distant past when one person first decided to instruct another, the worldwide ranks of teachers have-shown, in this closing decade of the twentieth century, to over 20 million. This present-day figure represents only those who make their livings as certified teachers at elementary, secondary, and university levels. The number of uncertified lay teachers, volunteer teachers, and auxiliary teachers would add millions to that figure.

In the United States, teachers are male, female, young, old, white, nonwhite, experienced, newly trained-a wide variety of people with different personalities, different specializations,

different opinions, different goals. Ideally, however, all teachers should have one thing in common: they should all love to teach.

### *Types of Personalities*

Margaret Mead once characterized the subculture of teaching, and of teachers in particular, as having three kinds of value systems or types of personalities. Because the classroom teacher is a primary agent of enculturation, his or her value structure and personal style become an issue of significance in the transmission of culture. Mead's three teacher roles include:

1. The "child-nurse," who helps the learner to be himself and to enjoy his present activities.
2. The "parent," who works for success and wants to prepare the child to succeed in her uncharted future.
3. The "grandparent," whose memories run far back and who enjoys helping children to appreciate their traditions.

The child-nurse teacher derives a sense of satisfaction from the child's enjoyment. The child-nurse readily takes part in activities and tends to be generally uncritical of children's behavior. Happiness and pleasant experiences for children are his or her primary goal. The parent teacher is committed to teaching skills and new ideas to his or her students. The parent teacher attempts to instill a success orientation and creates situations... and learning experiences-in which students meet new challenges. Ambition and progress are values of paramount importance to the parent teacher.

The grandparent teacher is philosophic in approach and has little concern for utilitarian matters. To the grandparent teacher, the legacy of the past, of the arts, and of tradition are precious and must be passed along to the younger generation. "New" ideas always have their precursors from the past. There is nothing new under the sun.