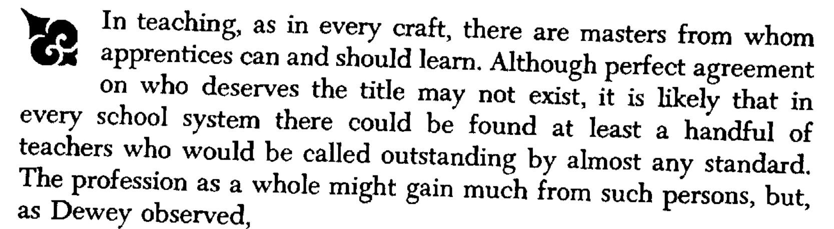
Teachers' Views 4

Now, in teaching as in several other things, it does not matter much what your philosophy is or is not. It matters more whether you have a philosophy or not. And it matters very much whether you try to live up to your philosophy or not. The only principles of teaching which I thoroughly dislike are those to which people pay only lip service.

George Polya, *Mathematical Discovery*



In teaching, as in every craft, there are masters from whom apprentices can and should learn. Although perfect agreement on who deserves the title may not exist, it is likely that in every school system there could be found at least a handful of teachers who would be called outstanding by almost any standard. The profession as a whole might gain much from such persons, but, as Dewey observed,

> . . . the successes of such individuals tend to be born and to die with them; beneficial consequences extend only to those pupils who have personal contact with such gifted teachers. . . . the only way by which we can prevent such waste in the future is by methods which enable us to make an analysis of what the gifted teacher does intuitively, so that something accruing from his work can be communicated to others.[1]

Perhaps, as Dewey's suggestion implies, the ideal way to learn from such teachers is to watch them in action. Certainly most of our teacher educators behave as if this were so. Observation typically plays an important part in teacher training programs and it is being used increasingly in educational research. But the teacher's classroom behavior does not always reveal what we want to know. Occupational attitudes, the feelings of satisfaction and of disappointment accompanying success and failure, the reasoning that lies behind action—these and many other aspects of a craft are scarcely visible except through conversations with a person who has experienced them. And it is not only *what* the practitioner says that is revealing. His way of saying it and even the things he leaves unsaid often contain clues to the nature of his experience. Consequently, talk is necessary, particularly talk about the professional aspects of life in the classroom. In this chapter professional shop-talk with 50 outstanding teachers provides the data with which to examine several aspects of the teacher's work.[2]

A major difficulty in following Dewey's advice about analyzing

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[1] John Dewey, *The Sources of a Science of Education* (New York: Liveright, 1929), pp. 10–11.

[2] In the interests of style and readability, the teachers' dialogues appear in edited form.

what the gifted teacher does is contained in the first step of deciding which teachers shall be considered gifted. The criteria of teaching effectiveness are notoriously elusive. Selection according to one standard, such as growth in student achievement, will not necessarily duplicate the results obtained by applying some other standard, such as the judgment of administrative superiors.[3] Under these circumstances the best approach to the problem might be to apply many different criteria, selecting as gifted only those teachers who are outstanding on all or most of them. Unfortunately, the cost and complexity of such a procedure make it impractical except in research focusing exclusively on the question of teacher effectiveness. If we are to move ahead in answering other questions before the debate over the definition of good teaching is adequately resolved, the only alternative is to select the criterion that seems most appropriate for a particular purpose, and then use proper caution in treating the results.

In gathering the material to be discussed in this chapter the judgments of administrators were used to identify a group of outstanding teachers. It is recognized that administrators may differ in their definitions of good teaching, and their direct knowledge of some teachers' classroom practices must surely be minimal. Nonetheless, in most school systems, reputations have a way of spreading, and after a time a teacher's merits, as perceived by students, parents, and fellow teachers, and as reflected in test scores and other indicators of pupil achievement are likely to become known to the administrator, particularly when the teacher is judged to be unusually good or bad. Of course when the evidence is scanty or conflicting, the administrator may have to rely on his own contact with a teacher to make a judgment. But, hopefully, for a few fortunate individuals the signs of teaching talent are neither scanty nor conflicting. If the administrator were required to nominate as outstanding only a very small number of his staff presumably he would tend to choose those for whom there is this surfeit of evidence. His nominees—the teachers to whom he points with pride—seem like reasonably attractive objects of study if we hope to learn something about teaching from those who have the reputation of practicing it with great skill.

[3] The interested reader will find several studies of the criterion of effectiveness discussed in: N. L. Gage (ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (Skokie, Ill.: Rand McNally, 1963); J. W. Getzels and P. W. Jackson, "Research on the variable teacher: some comments," *School Review*, **68**: No. 4, 1961; P. W. Jackson, "The teacher and individual differences," *Sixty-First Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), Chapter 5; and W. Rabinowitz and R. M. W. Travers, "Problems of defining and assessing teacher effectiveness," *Educational Theory*, 3:212–219, July 1953.

After the teachers have been selected, or at least a method for identifying them agreed upon, the question of what to talk to them about becomes paramount. What is that special "something accruing from his work" to which Dewey referred? And is that something communicable?

Because the general purpose of the interviews was to find out how a group of good teachers viewed life in the classroom, a logical beginning might be to focus on the quality of their teaching efforts. Thus, the opening question becomes, in short, how do they know when they are doing a good job in the classroom? The teachers responded readily to this question and, as will be seen, their answers challenge several of our current educational ideas and practices.

A second set of questions derive from the general theme of the essays in this book. These questions concern the relationship between the teacher's work and the institutional framework in which he and his students are embedded. The principal concern in this portion of the interview was with the teacher's reaction to the use of two forms of authority—his own and that of his administrative superiors. Two questions were particularly effective in uncovering these reactions. One dealt with the ways in which the teacher's personal style of work had changed over the years; the other dealt with the teacher's feelings about having his own work evaluated.

A final set of questions concerned the personal satisfactions that come from being a teacher. These questions were based on the assumption that something besides a monthly paycheck kept these teachers coming back to the classroom year after year. The teacher's replies not only substantiated this assumption but also revealed an aspect of the teacher's world view that might help to make the school experience less painful for young children than it might otherwise be.

Next, a word about the teachers whose views will be discussed. As was noted, our interviewees, with one or two exceptions, were nominated by administrators and supervisors believed to have first-hand knowledge of the quality of the teachers' work. The nominators were requested to select teachers who seemed to be doing outstanding jobs in their schools. Usually no more than one or two interviewees were chosen from each school. Therefore, as perceived by their administrative superiors, these teachers comprise the top 5 or 10 percent of the instructional staff. The sample was drawn chiefly from suburban communities surrounding Chicago. A small number of teachers from a metropolitan private school also participated.

The interviews were tape-recorded and usually were conducted in the teacher's classroom after school. The average interview lasted about 40 minutes; a few ran for more than an hour. The interviewees knew that we wanted to talk to teachers who had earned a highly

favorable reputation in their school system. The teachers were assured that their replies would be treated confidentially and that they would not be revealed in a way that might identify the person who made them.

A sample as small and as highly select as the one considered here is hardly representative of teachers in general. Nonetheless, the responses of these 50 teachers were examined in the hope that some generalizations about the teaching process might emerge. Thus, it is necessary to set some crude limits within which such generalizations might operate. To the extent that inference to a larger population is warranted, the present sample is probably best thought of as representing those elementary school teachers who rise to positions of leadership and respect in "advantaged" school systems.

Having acknowledged the restrictions that must be placed on inferential statements it is helpful to take a closer look at the question of what can be said about other teachers on the basis of the responses from the 50 who were interviewed. One way of rephrasing this question is to ask whether or not an overwhelming majority of elementary teachers might answer our questions in much the same way as those we interviewed. Perhaps classroom life is not the same for the run-of-the-mill teacher as for teachers with enviable reputations. The answer to this question is unknown and obviously would require comparing the responses of a group of *average* teachers (almost as difficult to define as *outstanding!*) with those of a group such as the one used in this study.

Yet even without waiting for data from a more representative sample it is safe to predict that some teachers will look like the ones portrayed here and others will not. The question of how many are included in the term *some* would be of great interest if our goal were to produce a demographic description of the entire teaching population. It would also be of interest if our goal were to identify the unique characteristics of the good teacher. But this chapter aims at neither goal. Rather the goal is the more modest one of seeing how some highly admired teachers view life in the classroom and then speculating on the consequences of the views they hold.

An analogy might be helpful here. If a group of lawyers, selected as outstanding by circuit court judges, was found to be critical of the Supreme Court, that fact would be important within certain contexts irrespective of whether or not the same views were held by the general membership of the legal profession. Similarly, if a group of teachers, thought to be unusually talented by their superiors, was found to be uneasy about certain aspects of their work or was found to endorse certain teaching practices enthusiastically, that finding would have significance irrespective of whether or not the same views were shared by others. The importance of what such a group thinks stems from the fact that these are the teachers, presumably, to whom special awards would be given if merit pay or other methods of recognizing talent were instituted within the schools in which they work. These are the people to whom beginning teachers might be directed when they seek professional advice. These are the staff members most likely to have student teachers assigned to their rooms. They are also the ones to whom outside visitors are most frequently introduced. In short, these teachers often serve as models for others. If it turned out that these model teachers resembled the average teacher in important respects it would be difficult to determine whether that resemblance spoke to the effectiveness of the model, or the inability of the judges to discriminate between the average and the exceptional or neither. In any event, judgments such as those just described are being made constantly in schools. The qualities of the persons on whom these professional kudos are bestowed may be expected to have consequences for both theory and practice.

As has been mentioned, the questions in the interview had three foci: the teacher's self-evaluation, the uses of institutional authority, and the satisfactions to be derived from the teacher's work. The goal of the interview was to find out how these teachers know when they were doing a good job, how they dealt with the fact of their own power and that of their administrative superiors, and what pleasures, if any, life in the classroom held out to them. As the teachers responded to these three sets of questions their answers seemed to contain three or four recurrent themes that were more general than the questions themselves and, thus, provided a useful way of organizing the interview material. These themes, each of which concerns an aspect of classroom life felt to be desirable or necessary for the fulfillment of teaching duties, will be used in combination with the questions themselves in the discussion that follows. Although the complexity of each theme defies a brief description, four one-word labels are offered as aids to memory. These are *immediacy, informality, autonomy,* and *individuality.* Each of these themes will be treated separately in the material to follow. The last section of this chapter contains a discussion of all four themes and their educational implications.

I

The *immediacy* of classroom events is something that anyone who has ever been in charge of a roomful of students can never forget. There is a here-and-now urgency and a spontaneous quality that

brings excitement and variety to the teacher's work, though it also may contribute to the fatigue he feels at the end of the day.

Although teaching might be thought of as being chiefly concerned with cognitive reorganization—with producing invisible changes within the student—this select group of teachers did not rely very much on pious hopes of reaping an "unseen harvest." In their view the results of teaching were quite visible. One aspect of this immediacy particularly evident in the reports of our teachers was the extent to which they used fleeting behavioral cues to tell them how well they were doing their jobs. The following brief interchange between the interviewer and an eighth grade teacher illustrates this tendency.

> INTERVIEWER: How can you tell when you're doing a good job?
>
> TEACHER: Oh, look at their faces.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Will you tell me more about that.
>
> TEACHER: Why, sure, they look alert; they look interested; they look questioning—like they're ready to question something. They look like they're anxious to learn more about it . . . And other times you know you haven't done a good job when they look blah or look disinterested or I-don't-care attitude, well then I feel bad, you know, I've done a bad job.

Another teacher tries to put her finger on the signs that tell her when one of her lessons has gone particularly well and ends, as did many others, by mentioning the visible signs of alertness and enthusiasm.

> The reaction, I think, of the children, and what they seem to have gained from it. Their interest; their expressions; the way they look.

A third interviewee, who teaches in the middle grades, reported this example of intellectual discovery and its facial consequences.

> . . . the day we were talking about (language) one of them wondered, came up later and said, "If we didn't have words, there'd be no knowledge and we couldn't tell anybody anything. All we could do is feel." And you could just tell from the look on her face that this whole thing suddenly had dawned on her.

One teacher with sixteen years of experience, all of them with fourth graders, claims to rely more on sound than on sight. She puts the matter this way.

> I can tell by the way they sound. There is a sound that you can tell, and you can tell when they're really working.
>
> INTERVIEWER: You mean the sound of the room in general?
>
> TEACHER: The sound of the room in general. Now it doesn't always have to be a quiet sound—It can be a noisy, buzzing sound, and you're still doing a good job, and everybody's working.
>
> INTERVIEWER: But can you tell?
>
> TEACHER: I can tell. You can feel it.

A man who began his teaching career in high school and who is now teaching in the fifth grade sees a parallel between the actor's sensitivity to his audience and the teacher's responsiveness to subtle changes in his students. For this teacher the determination of his effectiveness is not difficult at all.

> It's the easiest thing in the world. You know you're missing at the first yawn. Teaching and learning, if they're not enjoyable and fun, are both very difficult to accomplish. When the kids aren't having a good time, if they're not paying attention and sitting up, that's it—A theatrical sense is something that you can't learn, but a good actor can sense his audience. He knows when a performance is going well or not going well, simply by the feeling in the air. And it's that way in the classroom. You can feel when the kids are resistant.

Of course the teacher's interpretation of these signs is not infallible, as is indicated by the following comment from a teacher who was asked how she knew when she was doing a good job.

> It's a feeling, also, as I said before. And maybe I am overly enthusiastic. I may not be reaching them. I may just be elated and think, "Boy, that's great!" and then when I get down, they may be sitting there thinking "What's she doing?"

One of our interviewees, a woman who has spent seven years with first graders, comments on a subtle distinction between behavior that indicates the absence of enthusiasm and that which arouses the suspicion of real learning difficulties. As she puts it,

> First of all, I think there's a difference between their liking what you're doing and their learning what you're teaching. Sometimes they can like it immensely and not be learning a thing. You can tell when they're enthusiastic but you have to ask a few questions to know whether they're

> learning or not. In the first grade, if they don't *like* what you're doing, they will usually tell you so. They'll say "I don't want to do this anymore," or "When are we going home?" or something like this. They're very honest. But if they don't *understand* what you're doing, they usually won't express it verbally. They will climb on the desk or under the chair or make some quiet attempt to escape. They obviously don't want to have anything to do with the whole idea. Or else, if you question them, they'll know the answer, but not be very enthusiastic. They become very passive and usually don't cause you any trouble, but you know that they just aren't paying any attention.

Somewhat less fleeting than alert expressions and raised hands are indications that the student is willing to work above and beyond minimal expectations. These signs of a more enduring interest appear in a variety of forms, as the following set of comments from four of the interviewees indicate.

> They bring things to you like articles out of magazines or pictures they have drawn. For science or geography, they'll draw maps. To me, that shows they must be interested. Also they'll ask me for extra things they can do.

> Oh, another way you know is whether or not they bring slides, whether they bring in little pamphlets from the World's Fair for current events. Also visitors are an indication. One student has a cousin from out of town and asks "Could she please stay here for the morning?" You figure you've got something. Of course, maybe the mother wanted to get rid of the child for the morning. But there are parents who come in to school too because the child wants them to see what we're doing.

> I know I have caught their interest if they bring the things in that they need for experiments in science.

> If I have encouraged them to do more than the textbook readings in the basic text—if they have gone out into other books and tried to find pictures and other information, then I feel that they are interested in the subject.

As a group, the interview excerpts that have been presented thus far call attention to a puzzling feature of the relationship between the teacher's work and broader educational goals. From one point of view the school is properly described as a future-oriented institution. Its ultimate concern is with the future well-being of its clientele. A few educators may not like this description and may insist that school is life, and vice versa. But the preparatory function of school is hard to deny even in the earliest grades where the chief goal of education seems to be "enjoy, enjoy." Yet if we believe the testimony of these experienced teachers it is today's behavior rather than tomorrow's test that provides the real yardstick for measuring the teacher's progress. In fact, the attitude of these teachers toward tests and testing is sufficiently important to warrant special discussion.

In the most global terms, the goal of the schools is to promote learning. Thus, ideally we might expect teachers to derive a major source of their satisfactions from observing growth in achievement among their students. Further, the students' performance on tests of achievement (commercial or teacher-made) would seem to provide objective and readily obtainable evidence of this growth. Logically at least, the conscientious teacher ought to point with pride or disappointment to the gains or losses of students as measured by test performance. But, as is often true in human affairs, the logical did not occur. One of the most interesting features of the interview material was the absence of reference to objective evidence of school learning in contexts in which one might expect it to be discussed.

Testing, when it is mentioned at all, is given little emphasis. These teachers treat it as being of minor importance in helping them understand how well they have done.

The students' enthusiasm and involvement seem much more important than do their performance on tests, as is evident in the following comment by a fourth grade teacher who is identifying the evidence of effectiveness on which she typically relies.

> I know I'm getting through when the kids are sparking and interested and excited in what they're doing. I think it's the feeling of the class and it's the way the class behaves. I don't think you can tell off in a vacuum, and I don't think you can tell by the objectives, and I don't think you can tell by the tests. It's the degree to which the kids feel part of the activities of the room and participate in them with pleasure.

The most enthusiastic statement about testing in the entire set of interviews was the following from a fifth grade teacher who described how she knew when she was doing a good job.

> I don't rely entirely on tests. I use tests at the beginning of the year to find out what they know. Then, as the year

progresses I can tell how much they are learning by their attitudes and by their notebooks. I rely quite a bit on the notebooks. Occasionally I give a test, but I judge their progress by these other things too.

Several reasons for the teacher's avoidance of paper-and-pencil tests are hinted at by the teachers. In the very early grades, for example, there are few commercial tests available even if the teacher wanted to use this kind of formal evaluation. As a second grade teacher put it,

> As far as the second grade goes, there really isn't any testing. You can make up your own little exams but there is no good standard test. The *Iowa Test* is given in third grade, but the results don't mean anything until the child has taken it again in the fourth grade. You have to wait a year before you can tell anything from it.

In schools having a formal achievement testing program, the results, if they are ever reported to the teacher, arrive too late to do much good. When asked whether she used objective achievement data provided by the central office, one teacher commented,

> I'm always very anxious to see the standardized scores and see how the kids made out. But they come out at the end of the year and by that time it's too late to do anything about it. That's one of the things.
>
> INTERVIEWER: But might it affect what you do with the next group?
>
> TEACHER: With the next class? Not terribly.

From a psychological viewpoint, however, the scarcity of useful instruments and poor administrative practices in handling them are not as important as is a general distrust of tests that was evident in several of the interviews. Two major forms of this distrust can be identified. First is the belief that children behave atypically on tests; that test information often does not confirm the teacher's judgment derived from her classroom contacts. Furthermore, when these contradictions between test scores and teacher judgment occur, the teacher seems more likely to deny the accuracy of the test information than to alter her previous assessment of the student. The following set of remarks typify this point of view.

> I give written tests, but I don't count heavily on them. In my own personal experience, I've known a subject and not done well on a test on it. I stress oral participation in class and I can tell whether they are interested or not.

> Tests, of course, will help some, but I don't think the child always responds on a test so that you can tell exactly what progress he's made. A lot of them just never do well on a test even though on their daily work they show that they're making progress. You can judge progress by changes in their attitudes too. They have so many dislikes —"I don't like this" or "I can't do this." When their attitude begins to change and they *do* like what they are doing and they *can* do it, then I feel that they're making progress.
>
> At times it's discouraging, because I feel that I have covered the material very thoroughly, but I give a test and see the scores and think, "Oh, my! Didn't I teach any better than this?" And then I stop and think, well, they have certainly learned more than they knew before, and you can't expect them to get every little detail. . . .

A second form of distrust is represented by the suspicion that performance on achievement tests is more a reflection of native ability than of teaching effectiveness. Thus, when annual gains or losses are observed they are often interpreted as "natural" phenomena whose informational value to the teacher is very small. A third grade teacher puts the matter this way:

> Of course, the achievement grades mean something, but then you can't compare this classroom's results with another classroom's results because you have entirely different children. I don't think we should judge accomplishment by the test results. I so well recall the class that I had that went all the way from 3-1 to 4-2, workbook and all, and still had time left over. I've never had a class like it—since or before. I would hate to have that class's achievement records put beside, let's say last year's, which wasn't very good. District-wise and national-wise last year's achievement records were all right. But if you put the test records of those two classes side by side, I either didn't do a good job last year or I did an outstanding job that other year. And it wasn't that. It's just that I had the material to work with. That was all.

A fourth grade teacher made the following comment when asked to describe the conditions under which her teaching behavior would be influenced by the test performance of her students.

> It would if, for instance, all my kids had low reading scores. This isn't going to happen. I mean, it may not have any thing to do with the teacher when that happens.

In the extreme case, objective testing is perceived as being under the control of the authorities, completely unconnected with teaching objectives and with the routine of the classroom. When this point of view is present, it is hardly surprising to find the teacher looking upon testing as if it were just a nuisance.

> I was very upset that I had to spend an hour on standardized testing to find out whether or not they know the math. It was just for the SMSG book. I know what they know. It's a survey, so we have to do it.

> Today was a very tiring day because the children were tested this morning. Actually I didn't do much; I graded their papers and that's it. I'd rather have an active day. I think I'm more tired after a day of doing nothing.

Thus, the interview excerpts give the impression that the outstanding elementary teacher does not often turn to objective measures of school achievement for evidence of his effectiveness and as a source of professional satisfaction. Rather, the question of how well he is doing seems to be answered by the continual flow of information from the students during the teaching session. Spontaneous expressions of interest and enthusiasm are among the most highly valued indicators of good teaching, although the quality of the students' contributions to daily sessions is also mentioned frequently.

The attitude of these teachers toward testing and their reliance on fleeting behavioral cues combine to create a seeming paradox: present-oriented teachers in future-oriented institutions. Or is this as paradoxical as it first seems? Does the teacher's focus on today necessarily conflict with the school's focus on tomorrow? The answer, it would seem, is "No, not necessarily." Apparently teachers can and do give tests and keep an eye on long-range goals while concentrating on the immediate signs of student involvement and enthusiasm. Yet the fact that such a dual focus is possible suggests that it might become a source of discomfort for the teacher under certain circumstances. Our interview material reveals some signs of this discomfort even among teachers who have achieved an enviable reputation in their school systems.

II

A second theme in the interview material, one which has been labelled *informality*, is evident at two points in the comments of many teachers. It first appears in the descriptions the teachers give of their teaching style. Most frequently when asked to describe their distinctive ways of working with children, the teachers focused on the relative degree of formality or informality characterizing their daily work. For several teachers the broad question of style seemed to boil down to the narrower question of how they used their authority in the classroom. A young teacher who works with second graders was succinct in her response to our query about teaching style.

> I'd say I was very casual with the children, and I use a subtle, even sarcastic approach with them if I find it necessary.

Often our interviewees would compare their way of working with that of "old-fashioned" teachers or teachers whom they had had during their own childhood. As might be expected, these comparisons usually focused on the greater freedom and informality in the interviewee's classroom. The following response from a fifth-grade teacher is typical:

> I just have a very free and friendly attitude toward the children. It's much different from the old-fashioned type of teaching that I had when I was a kid, it really is. This school is quite a nice school to teach in; the children are very receptive to learning. So it's probably easier to be that way here than it would be in some places. . . .

> I would just say that I have to have a lot of freedom in the way that I teach because each class is different. It takes each class a different length of time to learn something that you're presenting to them. I do a lot of speaking myself, oral presentation, but not formal lectures. I try to maintain a very informal atmosphere and there's a lot of jumping around that goes along with it to keep the interest of the children. . . .

A veteran of forty years in elementary classrooms describes her style in this way,

> I think that in the classroom I try to be informal. I mean, I try to make this situation as much as possible like a family group sitting around a fireplace or around a table when some question has come up and they're discussing it. Now of course I believe in having discipline but it isn't the kind of authoritarian discipline that teachers practiced years ago, for instance, when my mother was teaching. But on the other hand I want the child to feel free sometimes to say, "I disagree with you" or "I think you've made a mistake." I want to feel that any time I can say

to the children, "I'm not certain about something and I would like to look it up." I don't want the children in my room to feel nervous about their work; I don't want the nerves in the back of their necks to become tense. If a child is performing commensurate with his ability, that's the most that I expect from each one.

The second point at which informality was mentioned by several of the interviewees was when they were asked to describe how their teaching had changed with time. Some, usually the more inexperienced teachers, focused on changes over relatively brief periods. For example, one fifth grade teacher said,

> My teaching is always more structured, more rigid at the beginning of the school year than it is later as I get to know the class. You have to know the class first before you can be relaxed and casual.

Others chose to focus on changes spanning their entire teaching career. For these teachers as well, the formality-informality dimension was frequently prominent, as in the following response from another fifth grade teacher,

> I think I've moved more from being a formal type of teacher into a more informal one. At the beginning of my teaching experience I was very concerned with being able to control my class. Many times I would feel that perhaps I would lose my discipline if I were more informal with the children and allowed them more freedom. Also I just didn't know the limits I could set for the children or how far they would go. I didn't know what limits were reasonable. After I became more accustomed to the typical behavior of children of this age, why it was easier for me to set less rigid limits.

These mentions of informality probably do not come as a surprise to anyone who has spent much time in modern elementary schools, particularly those in suburban communities. The hallmarks of today's classroom are the movable desks and the collapsible walls, with the concomitant social movement each affords. Gone are the fixed rows and frozen postures of yesterday. But the apparent informality is a relative matter at best. Its meaning is derived from a comparison of what teaching once was or what it might become if the teacher chose to exercise the full power of his authority. "Informal," as these teachers use the term, really means *less* formal rather than *not* formal, for even in the most up-to-date classroom much that goes on is still done in accordance with forms, rules, and conventions. Today's teachers may exercise their authority more casually than did their predecessors, and they may unbend increasingly with experience, but there are real limits to how far they can move in this direction. As a group, our interviewees clearly recognized and respected those limits. For them, the desire for informality was never sufficiently strong to interfere with institutional definitions of responsibility, authority, and tradition.

III

The third theme identified in our interviews had to do with the teacher's perception of his own professional *autonomy*. This theme is similar to the theme of informality but instead of focusing on the teacher's relation with his students it concerns his relation with his own superiors. Here too, apparently, there exists greater rigidity and formality than is desired.

Our interviewees mentioned two main threats to the teacher's autonomy, or at least two hypothetical conditions, which, if either materialized, would arouse complaint: one concerned the possibility of an inflexible curriculum; the other concerned the possible invasion of the classroom by administrative superiors bent on evaluation. Our teachers were quite emphatic about what they would do under the first of these conditions. A fifth-grade teacher, for example, became increasingly perturbed as he contemplated the potential loss of his autonomy.

> If I were given a curriculum guide and a series of lesson plans that said "You will teach this way; you will teach this material at this time and take so long to do it," if they made teaching too rigid or started telling me that I must use this book or that book and could not bring in supplementary materials of my own, and then I'd quit. Forget it! You can hire an orangutan to come in and pass out books. You really can! I'd walk out the door tomorrow.

It was not only male teachers who winced at the thought of too many curricular constraints. Many of the women were equally concerned. For example, one female interviewee confessed,

> . . . I moved from another system to this system for that very reason. There was so much supervision and so much "We will all be on page so-and-so in such-and-such a book on such-and-such a day." I don't see how you can teach that way because people are not like that. As long as you've

got ten different teachers teaching the same grade you are going to have it taught ten different ways, and yet the children are going to come out at the end of the year having gotten a great deal out of it. Ten different people present things in ten different ways because they *are* ten different individuals.

A fourth grade teacher with a decade of experience was equally adamant when asked to consider the possibility of increased restrictions in her choice of teaching materials. She first blurted out, "I'd get fired! I wouldn't do it!" and then went on to describe an incident that had occurred in her own school.

> An example is this math which we teachers feel is not properly programmed for fourth grade. We recently got together the fourth grade teachers and cut out what we didn't think the bulk of the students could handle and we told our principal what we had done. Now if he had said, "You can't do that. You've got to teach this," I'd have said, "Well, you need a new teacher." This would have been my attitude. I would be most uncomfortable in that kind of situation—if I felt I had to keep the job, I think I would be miserable.

Another fourth grade teacher tried to be as specific as possible in explaining to the interviewer what she would not like, and why.

> I would be bothered if I were told that I had to have arithmetic from nine to nine-thirty and spelling from nine-thirty to nine-forty-five. I think it's good to have a schedule but I would hate for them to say, "Now, if we come in your room at nine-thirty, that's what we want to see you teaching." Yes, that would bother me. I wouldn't like that at all. I certainly would not. That wouldn't be very flexible, would it? That's what I like to be. Suppose the children say to me, "Oh, Mrs. ——, here's a song that we learned in the beginning of the year." It's in a book that they're reading. I'll say, "Well, I hadn't thought about that song in a long time. Let's sing it." So we're in the middle of reading and we'll stop and sing this song. And they love that. You can see their little bodies slink back and relax. And, you know, it gets the crick out of my back, too.

Closely related to the threat of too many curricular controls is the requirement of having the classroom teacher plan his work far in advance. This practice was clearly distasteful to several of the

interviewees. As one veteran of twenty-nine years in the classroom put it,

> In neighboring districts, teachers have to have lesson plans made for nine weeks ahead of time and they have to be checked through. I don't believe I've made a lesson plan since I did my practice teaching. So I suppose if I ended up with a supervisor or principal that wanted lesson plans for nine weeks, it would shake me up. I'd probably get something down on paper; whether I'd follow it through or not I don't know. That would be something else.

There are two sources of uneasiness embedded in these complaints. One is the fear that the spontaneity of the classroom would be destroyed by too many constraints; the other is the hurt created by an implied insult to the teacher's professional pride. These two concerns are both present in the following statement from a second-grade teacher.

> I think that it's important that a teacher is respected for her own ideas about teaching and isn't told how to do it. I personally wouldn't like to be handed a curriculum guide and told "Follow it." I like to do what I want to do when I want to do it. I have friends in other systems who have to turn in lesson plans a week or a month in advance. To me this is silly, because you don't teach that way. If something interesting comes up, a butterfly flies in the window, we talk about butterflies. I do make a lesson plan out every week and Monday morning I stick to it from nine to ten, but by ten o'clock I'm usually off of it. I have it there for a substitute, or for myself, if I'm really hard up for something to do I can look in my book and see what I planned to do. But I—that would be one thing that would really annoy me.

The teacher's uneasiness over the prospect of being observed too frequently also is linked to his feelings of professional pride. The same second-grade teacher who just argued for the freedom to deal with the unexpected intrusion of a butterfly becomes quite upset when the intruder is a fellow human from the central office, as the following comment indicates.

> I hate to be observed. I would hate to have the principal or superintendent or somebody bugging me all the time. I think —— is an unusual system where we are very seldom observed. I sometimes used to wonder how I was doing. Now I don't because I'm confident. I know I'm

doing a fairly good job because I haven't had to retain too many students and the third grade teachers don't complain too much. But I often wondered at the beginning if they knew what I was doing. I could have been in there playing tiddledywinks. But I think they pride themselves on their original selection. I think that they feel they've weeded people out pretty carefully. I work better if I'm not checked up on. I would have guilt feelings if I didn't do enough work. But if someone were checking up on me, it'd work the other way. I'm just stubborn enough that I'd say, "Okay, come and watch and I won't do anything." That's one thing that would bother me about a system.

Apparently the intention of the visitors, their desire to "check-up," disturbs the teacher more than does their actual physical presence. As one teacher puts it,

> It doesn't bother me having people go in and out of the room, but it does bother me to have people come in and sit down and take notes. And that's another reason why I moved from that school.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Why did that bother you?
>
> TEACHER: I suppose because I feel they're going to criticize me. I don't know. It isn't because I can't take criticism, either, but it just does bother me to have people sit and write and take notes while I'm there, watching me.

A few of our teachers were so strongly opposed to the idea of being evaluated that they threatened to leave the classroom rather than withstand an outsider's critical glance. This attitude is particularly significant when we recall the professional status of our interviewees. These teachers, it must be remembered, were described as outstanding by their superiors. Supposedly they have the least to hide and the most to gain from the visit of an evaluator. Yet even the knowledge that they are well-thought-of does not allay the concerns of some. As an instance, a first-grade teacher who has spent most of her lifetime working with children and who, therefore, might be expected to be among the last to contemplate leaving her chosen profession, was quick to say,

> If I knew I had to face merit-rating I think that would make me get out immediately. Because—well various reasons. But in our district we are free to do what we think is right for the different grade levels.

Apparently these teachers feel most comfortable with the classroom door closed and the curriculum guides tucked away in the supplies closet. But their concern over the preservation of professional autonomy must not be misinterpreted as reflecting a desire for isolation and total independence. These teachers are not complaining about the togetherness of institutional living. They do not want to be alone with their roomful of pupils; they merely want to be free from inspection while performing certain of their duties. As a matter of fact, our interviews contain many indications of a desire to draw more heavily than they presently do on the services of other specialists within the system—such as music and art teachers. In other words, these teachers are not asking for a return to the isolated conditions of the one-room school. They want company and they want help, but they also want to preserve the feeling of being on their own in the classroom.

A similar complexity is found in their attitude toward a prescribed curriculum. Again, no one indicated the desire to construct his own educational program from scratch. All seemed quite willing to accept the guidelines set down by the curriculum committees and textbook manufacturers. But inside these guidelines they wanted room for spontaneity and the exercise of professional judgment. Here again, as was true of their desire for informality, the teacher's plea was for freedom, but freedom *within limits.*

IV

The fourth theme detected in the interviews is summarized by the word *individuality*. It deals with the teacher's interest in the well-being of individual students in his class and becomes particularly evident when the teacher is asked to describe the satisfactions he derives from his work. Although he confronts an entire class, it is what happens to individuals that really counts. As one teacher puts it,

> I think that the thing that perhaps keeps me in teaching is, not *all* those twenty-five or thirty kids that you have each year, but those one or two that finally, all of a sudden begin to see through things and have the world open up to them. I think that that's the thing—that, and the appreciations that you get from some children and from their families from year to year. The blossoming of a slow child, or of a shy child is—well, just seems to make it all worthwhile.

Though fleeting signs of student attention and involvement doubtlessly are gratifying to the teacher, they are not the greatest

satisfactions that life in the classroom has to offer. The joys of teaching—and, at least for this group of devoted professionals, "joys" is a more accurate word than "satisfactions"—the joys of teaching are many. They are not limited, as we have seen, to the official business of achieving educational objectives (though that may account for a part of them). Instead they reflect the variety of responsibilities and opportunities that comprise the role of the elementary school teacher. Moreover, they are closely tied to what the teacher sees happening to individual students. One way of organizing this assortment of pleasures is to order them in terms of the intensity of emotional involvement each entails.

At one extreme would be the continual satisfaction, usually of low intensity, that comes from thinking of oneself as serving a good cause. A sense of personal usefulness comes closest to describing this class of satisfactions. As one suburban teacher puts it,

> I think it's like missionary work. I've always been very socially-minded, and I think that we really do have a lot of work to do right in these communities, not just in the underprivileged ones.

A distinguishing feature of the elementary teacher's missionary work is, of course, the age of its beneficiaries. The teacher not only helps people, she helps them at the most crucial time of their lives—when they are young.

The following comment from a second grade teacher contains a realization of the potency of the early years in giving shape to later development.

> I think when you're helping young people, and—I don't know, it's rather hard to answer—you're teaching them something new all the time, you're helping them to develop. Especially down at this age, if they do not get a good background—this is my feeling anyway—if they do not have a good background by the time they come out of second grade, they will have trouble going on.

Underlying the sense of usefulness, then, is a spirit of urgency. Like the missionary, the teacher has only a limited time to complete his work. Moreover, if he does not succeed, the ill effects may be irreparable. The possibility of failure, of time running out, and of wasted efforts introduces an element of risk to the teacher's task that is absent in many of the more casual forms of social service—such as the ladies aid volunteers. Also, the fact that the teacher might fail means, of course, that he might succeed. His perception of student progress, as informal indicator of his success, is mentioned by several teachers as an important source of satisfaction providing

a more intense emotional experience than those derived from the mere fact of membership in a good cause. The following set of quotations epitomize this point of view.

> Let's see, the rewards. I think just seeing them happy and seeing them progress is the biggest reward.

> Seeing a child be successful is reward enough. I think this is the thing we are striving for, really, in education. We want to see a child find his place in life and be successful, and when he's on the road to this, even in school, we're happy. We watch, at least I do watch my youngsters as they go along and progress. I check up with the fourth grade teachers and see whether or not there are strengths or weaknesses or things that I should have been doing with them to help them along the way.

> The children's progress is a reward for me. I try to keep a very close check as to how they're getting along. If I have a child that comes in in the fall with many problems, many difficulties, and he overcomes some of those, then I feel that we're making progress and we're getting someplace.

> I get a bang out of seeing their faces light up with an idea or a sense of accomplishment.

In the last quotation the words "bang" and "light up" call attention to a characteristic of classroom life that provides an additional source of emotional arousal and satisfaction: the frequent occurrence of unexpected events. The fact that no one can predict with great accuracy what a day's teaching holds in store creates, at least for the teacher who craves variety, an atmosphere of pleasant anticipation about her work, perhaps even excitement. This feeling is well expressed in the following quotation from a third grade teacher.

> I just wish that everyone could feel the excitement that there is in teaching—the eagerness to get into the classroom. It's the strangest thing . . . that no matter if you're sad or if you don't feel well, or if things aren't the rosiest, you can come into the classroom in the morning and a child will come up and everything is all right. Because you're needed. Maybe the child is sad and you forget your troubles or maybe he has come in with something he just has to tell you and it's just the biggest thing in the world. All of a sudden, you know, you forget your problems. I

just wonder if there are other occupations like this, where people find the same gratification.

Elements of the unexpected and of surprise are also prominent in the following statements from two men. The first teaches a fifth grade class and the second works with eighth graders.

> Oh—well, I've mentioned some of the excitements of teaching: class discussion that veers in a surprising direction, that you never thought it'd go and goes higher than you ever dreamed possible; a child who never had any ideas that showed who suddenly makes an observation that brings two things together, "That's just like this." Sometimes one kid suddenly makes a spurt and does something that you never thought he could do. Sometimes it's a whole class that does something together that you never thought a class could do. One time a little fifth grade girl came up after class and said, "I just learned how to divide." That was that day—it was that class period. I don't know how it happened, but it happened.

> Of course you get rewards—at least I feel that I get rewards every day. Perhaps, having a small class that I can observe closely, I can see improvement better than a teacher with a larger class. But hardly a day goes by but some student who hasn't been doing so well or one that may have been doing quite well, grasps something different, or gets that little twinkle in his eye and—for once, he's achieved something that, maybe, he didn't think he could, and this is a reward for me.

Of course surprising and unexpected classroom events do not always have to do with the attainment of learning goals. Sometimes a student's behavior is just plain amusing or entertaining, and has little or no relevance to educational matters.

> Oh, I enjoy children's reactions to things, and the things that they say or do. They're so funny sometimes, I have wished that I had time to write a book, but you can't put them down on paper and make them sound as funny as they really are when they happen.

The unexpected events of the classroom vary considerably in size and importance, from small happenings that are often merely funny or annoying to great leaps of progress and motivational awakenings. The more dramatic transformations, which in some ways resemble acts of religious conversion, are yet another source of satisfaction for the teacher to experience—at a deeper level of emotion than those already described. If unexpected events in general bring excitement to the teacher's work, these classroom "miracles," which are of major proportions and of great psychological significance, afford the teacher who is fortunate enough to witness them, something close to a thrill.

In their descriptions the teachers often use literary devices, such as metaphor and simile, to emphasize the dramatic and almost magical quality of some of these transformations. The students in question don't simply change for the better, they "see the light of day," they "wake up," they become "uncorked," and so forth. The following set of comments from three seasoned teachers illustrates the use of metaphorical expressions to describe what happens in class.

> There are the advanced ones, whom you see you have helped advance more. There are the very very slow ones who all of a sudden see the light of day, and you feel that you've shown them the way. Even if it was just their own development, you give yourself credit.

> I think I have satisfaction seeing someone progress, especially a slow child or an average child who all of a sudden comes out, maybe in the middle. I had a boy in here at the beginning of the semester who wouldn't work. He'd just sit. He's very intelligent, on the verge of being a genius I understand, but he wrote like a second grader, wouldn't bother doing work, would forget things. This went on and on. Then he was sick and was absent and after he came back in January, all of a sudden he was a different boy. He's got average handwriting now, but he finishes everything. He gets almost straight A's. It's a satisfaction that maybe I have gotten across to him; on the other hand, maybe it's him, maybe he just woke up.

> Let me cite one case specifically where a child did a series of triangles and thought it was beautiful but it wasn't beautiful. I asked her to use her eyes and observe and see if she could make it better. She was quite agreeable to looking out the window and looking at the forms that windows make and the forms that a building makes, and we worked on her drawing. I don't think I've ever seen a more thrilled face than when she realized that she could do something to make that drawing more interesting. She became uncorked.

Dramatic changes do not take place, of course, within every student. But the few that do occur are sufficient compensation for the hours

spent in front of a blackboard. A first grade teacher makes this point clear.

> When you see a child that has suddenly caught on and is enjoying reading or is going ahead to be an independent worker, you can't help but have satisfaction and know that you have done something for this particular child. You know that you aren't going to do wonders with every child because children—some of them just don't hit maturity until second or third grade. But when you do see a child bloom, it's gratifying.

The sources of satisfaction discussed thus far have been presented in order of increasing emotional intensity—from a sense of personal usefulness, to a feeling of accomplishment, to excitement created by the unexpected, to the thrill of witnessing dramatic change. The most dramatic change of all and, hence, one of the greatest thrills of teaching occurs when the person who changes is a student whom other teachers, or adults in general, have given up for lost. This situation, which is epitomized in the story of Helen Keller's childhood, and which was so movingly portrayed in the play and movie, "The Miracle Worker" might not happen too often, but when it does it is memorable, as the following comment indicates.

> When you've had a child who has been a severe problem and some way you've reached him and done something for him, that's a real thrill. I just don't think there's any other job that provides you with the depth of feeling that you have in a situation like this. Oh, perhaps a doctor, when he saves a life has such a feeling. But I think in most professions, they don't have such experiences. It's almost a spiritual feeling that you get when you've had a success reaching such a child and helping him.

Because these transformations cannot be accurately predicted, and because they sometimes seem to happen despite, rather than as a result of, what anyone has done to the student, it is impossible to give credit for their occurrence with much certainty. Nevertheless, their unpredictability neither dulls the teacher's enjoyment of these events, nor discourages him from taking at least partial credit for them.

> It's a real satisfaction to see someone make a great step forward. I mentioned a little girl I have who was particularly unresponsive. At the first of the year I thought she wasn't getting anywhere and I was about to give up on her. Now she's doing well, especially in science. I think I want to take a part of that credit, but maybe she'd have done it anyway. With these things you never know.

The desire to witness these most moving of all classroom experiences, and possibly to have a hand in their occurrence, doubtlessly increases the attractiveness of troubled, "lost," unwanted children in the eyes of many teachers. When room assignments are made it is not unusual for a teacher to seek out such students for his class. In a sense, these youngsters are academic longshots: there is small chance of their ending in the money, but the assurance of an enormous emotional payoff to the teacher if they do. The reference to gambling must not leave the impression that the teacher is merely playing games—selfishly stacking the membership of his class to produce the biggest emotion "bang." But there is something attractive about the underdog, and many teachers feel an affection and closeness to these children quite unlike that which they feel toward the more "well-adjusted" or successful student. A fourth grade teacher makes this point quite clear.

> I have favorites as people. There are some kids who are just plain more attractive than others. And it's not always in terms of what a non-teacher would think attractive. I can find a kid with a lot of problems extremely attractive. Take Billy, for instance. I first saw this little bitty boy get up in front of a whole audience and make a fool of himself. Then I asked for him for my class. He is a thoroughly unattractive child in many, many ways. But I felt a kind of a bond with him just from watching everybody laughing and not being sure whether they were laughing with or at him. You see, there's this kind of attractiveness too.

For some teachers a sudden change in a child's behavior releases special feelings of warmth and affection.

> The little girl whose drawing I just described was colorless and I didn't have very much feeling for her for a long time. Then all of a sudden when she began to make discoveries, her personality popped out and I loved her.

The use of the word "love" in the above quotation introduces a source of satisfaction that transcends even the thrill of observing a student's metamorphosis. During their interviews many teachers, particularly the women, spoke of their deep affection for individual children. At this level of emotional attachment the role of teacher as teacher begins to blur and to merge with the role of mother. Occasionally a teacher referred specifically to the relationship between teaching and mothering, and spoke frankly and poignantly

of the motives underlying her own behavior. The following comments are illustrative.

> A teacher has to find what age she enjoys—and I'm sure that depends on the personality of the teacher. For myself, I like mothering and so I like to teach the lower grades. Probably I feel this way because my husband and I never could have children of our own, much as we wanted to. I like the love and affection you get from the young children which I miss from children of my own. Probably another teacher who didn't have this need would enjoy teaching a little more stimulating material.

> For me, of course, it's working with the children that makes teaching rewarding. I am married, but do not have any children of my own and I feel that I get a lot from being with the children in my class. Contact with them is probably what I would miss most if I left teaching. Some of them become very close, and yet in teaching you just cannot treat one child differently from the other child. Still you can't help thinking, "If I had one, I would like it to be. . . ."

Not all teachers, of course, admit to feelings as deep as those discussed here. In fact, one teacher of the middle grades explicitly denied the appropriateness of the term "love" when used to describe her relationship with her students.

> I think I would call it respect rather than love or affection. Yes, I'd call it respect.

Yet this same teacher, when asked what the close of the school year was like, remarked,

> Sometimes I'm very unhappy at the end of the year because I'd like to teach the same class again. You become so attached to them sometimes that you just would enjoy continuing with the same group for another year.

The pain of separation was mentioned by several of the teachers. Although it is the opposite of satisfaction, this discomfort at the thought of the students' departure deserves mention because it attests to the closeness of the ties that develop, sometimes even against the teacher's will.

> Comes June and I hate to see these children go. You just get attached to them.

> In the beginning of the year for years I've resented the teacher who got the class I had had the year before. I can't help thinking of them as my kids. However, as the years go by I'm learning to live with this kind of thing.

> I don't know just why, but I do get very attached to them through the years. . . . One of the joys of the holiday season is hearing from so many youngsters. Some of them are now in high school.

As the preceding interview excerpt indicates, in a few happy instances the teacher-pupil relationship never truly ends. The reward of being remembered with affection by former students is important to many teachers. Also, many continue to participate vicariously in a student's accomplishments long after he has left the classroom. This extension of the teacher-pupil relationship over time adds a final (though somewhat milder) type of satisfaction to those already discussed. The probability of deriving pleasure from the remembrances or achievements of former students obviously increases with years of teaching experience.

> I have had a lot of satisfaction in picking out youngsters who probably would never have gone to college and encouraging them to go. I've loaded them in my car on Saturdays and taken them to college campuses. I've helped them to apply for whatever it was they had to apply for to get them started in college. Yes, I've had some real rewards doing that; one of those youngsters is a Ph.D. and is on the faculty of —— now. I don't know, they might have all gotten into college without me, it's hard to know. But I've given myself some credit for their going.

> In one year, I probably won't see any specific gains in the youngsters but when my third graders go into fourth grade, then I begin to see real progress and this gives me great pleasure. Another pleasure is having students come back to see me from high school, and from college. Some of the youngsters who were no great shakes in third grade have become valedictorians in their high school careers and this makes me feel real good, that maybe a little of what I tried to teach them has really rubbed off.

> I like to think that whatever these kids become, I have put my licks in somewhere along the line. That gives me a terrific feeling of pride.

The focus on the individual and on the gratifications provided by former students was amusingly described by an interviewee who teaches English to seventh and eighth graders. This teacher, who has

spent more than thirty-five years at her work, is still puzzled from time to time about the motives that keep her coming back to the classroom each fall.

> I sometimes wonder what I do like about teaching. I suppose that in the long run I know honestly, and I hear from many students, that something has been accomplished. The glow from that feeling of accomplishment warms me up enough to keep me going on. Now granted in February when they're all monsters or they're out with the flu and I'm making up work, I can't see why I am teaching, frankly. But I suppose basically I like the children and basically I never give up hope, and I—I am enthusiastic every September. Why, I have no idea. But I get rather excited, and I look at this batch of new faces and I think, "Mercy!" But I can like them. I grow to like even the worst. I had three seniors come in to see me last night; they're graduated from high school, wanted to know if I remember them—How could I forget! Yes, I remembered them, remembered some of the things that had happened and felt good that they remembered and they came back to say so. I had one young man come in who is taking his master's degree in journalism. He asked if I remembered him in English. I could never forget him. He was the world's worst . . . I suppose it's those things that make teaching worthwhile.

Given the pleasure these teachers reportedly derive from the progress of particular students, we might begin to wonder whether they would prefer a one-to-one arrangement such as occurs in the tutorial form of instruction. After all, with only one student at a time to worry about the teacher might concentrate all of his energies on the task of producing a change of great magnitude. But the tutoring relationship was an unappealing alternative to our interviewees.

When asked what they believed the ideal teacher-student ratio to be, most of our teachers expressed a preference for a class of 20 to 25 students. The suggestion of a class with 10 or fewer students met with almost unanimous rejection. The specific reasons for this rejection varied somewhat from teacher to teacher but the underlying idea was shared by many. The teachers complained that the small group would not offer enough stimulation or "give-and-take." One talked about needing a larger group to facilitate "the intermingling of personalities"; another argued that there would not be enough competition if the number of students became too small. A fourth grade teacher summed up the opinion of many when she said, "There's a certain spark that you lose if you have too few."

Thus, paralleling the teacher's delight in observing the progress of individuals is his insistence on having a group with which to work. At first glance these conditions may appear contradictory, but on further reflection the apparent contradiction disappears. These teachers are not asking for a group in the usual social or psychological sense of the term. They do not talk about their class as if it comprised a social unit with integrated parts and differentiated functions. Rather they seem to be calling for a collection of individuals, a collection large enough to "keep things moving" and small enough to preserve the visibility of individual members. Stable social relations commonly develop within these collections of students and some classes surely evolve into groups in the functional sense of the term. But the primary unit of the elementary school teacher's concern and the major source of his satisfaction remains the individual and his development.

V

Having identified the broad themes around which the talks with teachers seemed to revolve, there remains the task of considering the general relevance of the interview material for an understanding of life in classrooms. In doing so it will be necessary to touch upon aspects of the interviews that have only been briefly mentioned as well as those about which there has already been extensive discussion. The conversations of the teachers bear broadly on two topics: the conditions of teaching, and the general psychology of those adults who choose to work in elementary schools. These two topics are related, in turn, to the general question of how individuals, adults and children alike, come to grips with the demands of institutional life.

One of the most notable features of teacher talk is the absence of a technical vocabulary. Unlike professional encounters between doctors, lawyers, garage mechanics, and astrophysicists, when teachers talk together almost any reasonably intelligent adult can listen in and comprehend what is being said. Occasionally familiar words are used in a specialized sense, and the uninitiated listener may be momentarily puzzled by the mention of "units," or "projects," or "curriculum guides," or "word attack skills," but it is unlikely he will encounter many words that he has never heard before or even those with a specialized meaning.[4]

[4] This quality of teacher language has also been noted by my colleague Professor Dan Lortie. See, for example, his article "Teacher socialization: the Robinson Crusoe model," in *The Real World of the Beginning Teacher* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1966), pp. 54–66.

Not only is there an absence of a technical vocabulary unique to teaching, but also little use is made of jargon from related fields. A few psychological expressions are used from time to time (IQ is doubtlessly the most popular), but technical terms from the literature of psychopathology, group dynamics, learning theory, social organization, and developmental psychology—to name only the more obvious supporting disciplines—are noticeably absent. Teachers rarely talk about defense mechanisms, group cohesiveness, reinforcement schedules, role expectations, and sociocentric stages, even when it might be appropriate for them to do so.

The absence of technical terms is related to another characteristic of teachers' talk: its conceptual simplicity. Not only do teachers avoid elaborate words, they also seem to shun elaborate ideas. Obviously, this characteristic is not unique to teachers. Complicated thought is difficult and most people avoid it when they can, but such an avoidance (if that is what it should be called) does take on a special significance when we consider the importance of the teacher's work. Superficially at least, it would seem as if the thinking of teachers ought to be as complex as they can make it, as they set about the serious business of helping students to learn. Unnecessary simplicity, therefore, when revealed in the language of a teacher, would be interpreted by many as a cause for alarm. Whether or not that alarm is justified is a question to which we shall return.

Four aspects of the conceptual simplicity revealed in teachers' language are worthy of comment. These are: 1) an uncomplicated view of causality; 2) an intuitive, rather than rational approach to classroom events; 3) an opinionated, as opposed to an open-minded, stance when confronted with alternative teaching practices; and 4) a narrowness in the working definitions assigned to abstract terms.

When discussing the events with which they are confronted daily, teachers often talk as if theirs was a world in which single causes typically produced single effects. As they struggle to explain a puzzling classroom episode they commonly settle on what they consider to be *the* explanation. Why is Billy doing so well in school? Because he has a high IQ. Why is Fred such a trouble-maker? Because he comes from a broken family. Why are the children so noisy today? Because it's getting near the Christmas holiday. Even their own behavior as teachers is approached as if there were some kind of a one-to-one correspondence between cause and effect. Why, for example, did they choose to become teachers in the first place? The answer is obvious. Because they like children. Why else?

It is easy, of course, to make fun of these oversimplifications, but the complexity underlying most classroom events is so great that the teacher's search for a quick resolution of this complexity is

understandable, perhaps even forgiveable. Were she seriously to try untangling the web of forces that combine to produce reality as she knows it, there would be no time for anything else. Moreover, when all is said and done, who does know for certain why Billy performs so well in school or why Miss Jones has elected to spend her life in a kindergarten? The assignment of single causes to these events is short-sighted, to be sure, but it does bring some semblance of order to an otherwise confusing and often chaotic environment.

Their willingness to accept simple explanations for complex events does not mean that teachers commonly insist on explanations for everything they witness. On the contrary, they are unusually willing to accept things as they are without probing too deeply into the whys and wherefores. Indeed, many classroom phenomena are so unexpected and their causes so hidden from sight that teachers tend to treat them as minor miracles. This attitude is particularly evident when the event in question is pedagogically desirable. When a student makes a sudden leap of progress or when an apathetic youngster undergoes a dramatic reversal of attitude, the teacher's response, quite naturally, is apt to be one of delight and thankfulness. But this response is unlikely to be followed by an analytic scrutiny of what has taken place. When good fortune strikes, the teachers seem to be saying, it is best not to ask too many questions.

The unquestioning acceptance of classroom miracles is part of a broader tendency that reveals itself in several ways in the talk of teachers. This is the tendency to approach educational affairs intuitively rather than rationally. When called on to justify their professional decisions, for example, my informants often declared that their classroom behavior was based more on impulse and feeling than on reflection and thought. In other words, they were more likely to defend themselves by pointing out that a particular course of action *felt* like the right thing to do, rather than by claiming that they *knew* it to be right. As the structure of a teaching session or of a class day unfolds, the teacher frequently behaves like a musician without a score. He ad-libs.

It must be remembered, of course, that the impulses and intuitive hunches of most of these teachers had been tempered by years of practical experience. Thus, the basis of their action might be much more rational than their self-reports would lead us to believe. In their daily doings they may, in effect, be rendering "by heart" a type of performance that would have to be carefully reasoned and rehearsed by a group of novices. But whether they advanced to this intuitive level late in their careers or whether they performed this way from the beginning is less important within the present context than is the fact that now, as seasoned teachers, they often reported themselves to be playing the melody by ear.

The alert critic will be quick to point out that almost all of the interviewees were women, thus intimating that the so-called intuitive quality revealed in the interviews is nothing more than interviewees exercising their feminine birthright. "After all," he might argue, "women are supposed to be intuitive. Why should we be surprised to find female teachers behaving like other women?" But the important question is not whether the teachers are more intuitive than their non-teaching sisters. Rather, it is whether they are unnecessarily intuitive when their actions might better be guided by reason. We must ask, in other words, about the overall propriety of intuition in the classroom. No one objects if a cook adds an extra pinch of salt just because she feels like it. But the same behavior on the part of a pharmacist is quite another matter.

One might expect people who do not inquire into the reasons for things and who tend to act impulsively to be indecisive when expressing their own tastes. But, judging from the interviews, classroom teachers could hardly be so described. Despite the weakness of their intellectual tenacity and the intuitive softness of their talk, they commonly expressed strong opinions concerning their ways of teaching. Moreover, the strength of their opinions did not seem to be affected by the fact that they were often unable to defend their choices. Like amateur art-lovers they knew what they liked, even if they did not always know why they liked it. When pressed for a rationalization of their pedagogical tastes they not infrequently became impatient or hid behind the defense of *de gustibus non est disputandum.* Rarely, if ever, did they turn to evidence beyond their own personal experience to justify their professional preferences.

A fourth indicator of the conceptual simplicity contained in the teachers' language is reflected in the narrowness of the working definitions they assign to common terms. Although teachers often use words and phrases denoting global aspects of human behavior (such as *motivation, social relations,* and *intellectual development*) the referents of these terms, on close inspection, are usually found to contain only pale reflections of the rich concepts from which they are derived. *Motivation,* in pedagogical shop-talk, typically refers to a student's zest for undertaking school assignments, and little else. *Social relations* commonly has as its sole referent the quality of the student's interaction with his classmates and his teacher, and the complexity of that definition is often further reduced to a crude estimate of the student's popularity with his peers. When intellectual development is discussed by teachers, that development is described almost exclusively in terms of the student's mastery of curricular objectives, or a summary statistic depicting his performance on a test of general ability. As might be expected, these conceptual curtailments correspond roughly to the limits of the teacher's experience in the classroom. Teachers do not usually have occasion to probe the unconscious motives of their students or sketch the contours of their social life space or examine the depths of their intellectual powers. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, to find that profound words, in the teachers lexicon, have a distinctly parochial cast.

The narrowness of the definitions assigned to global terms not only provides further evidence of conceptual simplicity, it also serves to introduce another major characteristic of teachers' language. Even though she may attach abstract labels to what she observes, the focus of the teacher's concern is on her concrete experience with a particular group of students. In brief, she lives in a world of *sharp existential boundaries* and those boundaries evince themselves in the way she talks.

There was a striking immediacy about the things that concerned the teachers—a here-and-nowness about their talk that becomes compellingly evident after prolonged listening. Perhaps this quality should not surprise us. After all, during every working day the teacher is immersed in an environment of real people and things whose demands upon her are continuous and insistent. Moreover, many of the unique features of her world become so well known to the teacher that it becomes difficult for her mentally to erase their identity and think of them as merely concrete manifestations of more abstract phenomena. Consequently, generalizations about the characteristics of children or about the merits of an educational theory are continually being tested, as the teacher considers them, against the qualities of the particular students with whom she is working and the specific constraints of her classroom. As might be expected, this degree of specificity greatly inhibits the easy translation of theory into practice and serves to increase the difficulty of communications between the teacher and others with more abstract interests.

The teacher's focus on the physical and social reality of her classroom—her embeddedness, so to speak, in the here-and-now—is not the only indicator of existential boundaries defining the limits of her concern. In addition, there are signs of emotional ties to her students and to other aspects of her environment, ties binding her even more securely than does mere familiarity to the setting in which she works. Of course everyone cares to some extent about what he is doing and about his daily associates. To that extent, then, teachers are no different from anyone else. But the intensity of the teacher's emotional investment in her work, if we can believe the way she talks about it, often exceeds this common concern. In this respect, teachers resemble clergymen, therapists, physicians, and others whose duties link them intimately to the personal well-being

of their clientele. Yet the teacher's clientele, it must be remembered, are children and her contact with them is much more intensive in most cases than is true for those who perform these other professional services.

The teacher's concern with the here-and-now and her emotional attachment to her world was often accompanied in her conversations by an accepting attitude toward educational conditions as they presently exist. Interest in educational change was usually mild and typically was restricted to ideas about how to rearrange her room or how to regroup her students—how to work better with the educational "givens," in other words. Rarely, if ever, was there talk of the need for broad or dramatic educational reforms, even though the interviews provided ample opportunity to discuss these matters. This acceptance of the status quo, which might be described as a kind of pedagogical conservatism, appeared to be part of the general myopia typifying the classroom teacher's intellectual vision.

From one point of view, the features of teachers' language that have been described here are anything but flattering. Lacking a technical vocabulary, skimming the intellectual surface of the problems they encounter, fenced in, as it were, by the walls of their concrete experience, these teachers hardly look like the type of people who should be allowed to supervise the intellectual development of young children. Yet it must be remembered that most of the teachers from whose conversations these generalizations were derived were themselves highly respected practitioners of the teaching craft. Three possible explanations of this apparent paradox deserve brief comment.

First, it is possible that the evidence was badly misread. Perhaps someone else listening to the same set of interviews would come up with impressions quite different from those presented here. Second, it is possible that these teachers were not as highly gifted as their administrators and colleagues thought they were. Perhaps they more closely resemble the average, or even below-average, practitioner than they do the masters of their craft. Third, it is possible that the seemingly undesirable aspects of teachers' language are not so undesirable after all. Perhaps those qualities that might be a hindrance in many other settings do not adversely affect the teacher's functioning in the classroom. Indeed, it may even be that what looks like a general weakness in the quality of the teacher's thought processes is actually a strength when seen within the context of her life in the classroom.[5]

The possibility of having grossly misread the data or of having inadvertently chosen an inappropriate sample cannot be effectively dismissed. Consequently, it is necessary to remain skeptical while considering the third and far more intriguing possibility: namely, that what seems to be a human failing on the part of the teachers may be, at least in part, a pedagogical virtue.

The job of managing the activities of 25 or 30 children for 5 or 6 hours a day, 5 days a week, 40 weeks a year, is quite a bit different from what an abstract consideration of the learning process might lead us to believe. In the small but crowded world of the classroom, events come and go with astonishing rapidity. There is evidence, as we have seen, to show that the elementary school teacher typically engages in 200 or 300 interpersonal interchanges every hour of her working day. Moreover, although that number may remain fairly stable from hour to hour, the content and sequence of those interchanges cannot be predicted or preplanned with any exactitude. In short, classrooms are not neat and orderly places even though some educational theories make them sound as if they are or should be. This does not mean that there is no order in educational affairs (indeed, some teachers strive so hard to maintain some semblance of order that they lose sight of everything else), but the structure underlying these kaleidoscopic events is not easily discerned, nor is it, except superficially, under the control of the teacher.

The personal qualities enabling teachers to withstand the demands of classroom life have never been adequately described. But among those qualities is surely the ability to tolerate the enormous amount of ambiguity, unpredictability, and occasional chaos created each hour by 25 or 30 not-so-willing learners. What is here called the conceptual simplicity evident in teachers' language may be related to that ability. If teachers sought a more thorough understanding of their world, insisted on greater rationality in their actions, were completely open-minded in their consideration of pedagogical choices, and profound in their view of the human condition, they might well receive greater applause from intellectuals, but it is doubtful that they would perform with greater efficiency in the classroom. On the contrary, it is quite possible that such paragons of virtue, if they could be found to exist, would actually have a deuce of a time coping in any sustained way with a class of third graders or a play-yard full of nursery school tots.

The existential boundaries said to be revealed in the talk of teachers may also have adaptive significance when considered in the context of the demands of classroom life. There is a certain appropriateness, even charm perhaps, in the image of the absent-minded professor. If he is to do his work well he must be able, at

[5] The possibility of socially undesirable traits having adaptive significance for the teacher has also been suggested by J. M. Stephens in his fascinating article, "Spontaneous schooling and success in teaching," *School Review*, 68:152–163, Summer 1960. This argument is more fully elaborated in his recent book, *The Process of Schooling: A Psychological Examination* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967).

least figuratively, to free himself for long periods of time from his physical and social surroundings. But the image of an absent-minded elementary school teacher is not nearly so appealing. Indeed, such a combination of qualities might prove to be quite disastrous. People who work with groups of children cannot afford to be absent, in either mind or body, for any extended period of time. Moreover, even after the pupils leave for home they are gone but not forgotten in the mind of their teacher. The slightest mention of an abstract concept having educational overtones is enough to stir up a vision of Carl, the red-headed boy in the third row.

There is, of course, something romantic, even sentimental perhaps, about the image of teachers being presented here. But that romanticism is itself consonant with the qualities being described. Although they might never verbalize it in these terms, the interviewees, as a group, did seem to lean toward a tender-minded world view. Despite their immersion in the here-and-now, their view of children was definitely idealized and was tinged with a quasi-mystical faith in human perfectability. These signs of romantic idealism and mystical optimism may be disturbing to many people, especially to researchers and others who believe their mission in life is to dispel such old-fashioned views. But the persistence of this tender-mindedness in generations of teachers is surely no accident. Like conceptual simplicity and sharp existential boundaries, it too may have its adaptive significance. As Broudy and Palmer remind us in their informative book, *Exemplars of Teaching Method:*

> Modern psychology has given a solid and nonsentimental basis for mental hygiene and careful attention to child development, but unless a culture is entranced by the potentiality of childhood and passionately devoted to its realization, the commitment to the long nurture of the young would be prudential at best. Once the "cosmic" dimension of childhood is dropped, the life and activities of the child degenerate either into means to be manipulated for the benefit of adults or into a necessary but unfortunate marking of time.[6]

The teachers with whom I have spoken would probably agree with this statement, at least intuitively.

Here, then, are a few impressions stimulated by the talk of teachers. From one point of view, that talk does indeed leave much to be desired. It might even be described as dull much of the time. Yet, if listened to carefully and if considered in the light of what we know about classroom life, it does begin to make a lot of sense.

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[6] Harry Broudy and John Palmer, *Exemplars of Teaching Method* (Skokie, Ill.: Rand McNally, 1965), p. 129.

VI

Sometimes teaching is described as a highly rational affair. Such descriptions often emphasize the decision-making function of the teacher, or liken his task to that of a problem-solver or hypothesis-tester. Yet the interviews with elementary teachers raise serious doubts about these ways of looking at the teaching process. The immediacy of classroom life, the fleeting and sometimes cryptic signs on which the teacher relies for determining his pedagogical moves and for evaluating the effectiveness of his actions call into question the appropriateness of using conventional models of rationality to depict the teacher's classroom behavior.

This questioning of the usefulness of rational models is not intended to imply that teaching is totally irrational or that the customary laws of cause and effect somehow fail to operate in the classroom. Obviously events are as lawful there as they are in any other sphere of human endeavor. But the activities assumed to accompany rational thought processes—activities such as the identification of alternative courses of action, the conscious deliberation over choice, the weighing of evidence, the evaluation of outcomes—these and other manifestations of orderly cognition are not very salient in the teacher's behavior as he flits back and forth from one student to another and from one activity to the next.

The fact that the teacher does not appear to be very analytic or deliberative in his moment-to-moment dealings with students should not obscure the fact that there *are* times when this is not true. During periods of solitude, in particular, before and after his face-to-face encounter with students, the teacher often seems to be engaged in a type of intellectual activity that has many of the formal properties of a problem-solving procedure. At such moments the teacher's work does look highly rational.

This brief mention of the teacher's behavior during moments when he is not actively engaged with students calls attention to an important division in the total set of teaching responsibilities. There is a crucial difference it would seem between what the teacher does when he is alone at his desk and what he does when his room fills up with students. Although this difference was not explicitly mentioned in the interviews with the elementary teachers it was implicit in their discussion of such matters as the relationship between lesson plans and their daily work. In the classroom, as elsewhere, the best laid schemes suffer their usual fate.

The distinction being made here between two aspects of the teacher's work is so fundamental and has so many implications for educational matters that it deserves some kind of official recognition in the language used to describe the teaching process. The terms

"interactive" and "preactive" might serve this purpose. What the teacher does vis-à-vis students could be called "interactive teaching" and what he does at other times—in an empty classroom, so to speak—could be called "preactive teaching." These terms help us keep in mind a qualitative difference that is often overlooked in educational discussions.

There is something special, in a cognitive sense, about interactive teaching, about what goes on when a teacher is standing before his students. At such times the spontaneity and immediacy and irrationality of the teacher's behavior seem to be its most salient characteristics. At such times there appears to be a high degree of uncertainty, unpredictability, and even confusion about the events in the classroom.

At first glance the teacher's intuition, his delight over the mystery of human change, and his buoyant optimism appear strangely out of keeping with the highly organized setting in which he works. Such qualities might even be expected to be dysfunctional when they occur in a person who must perform within the confines of a formal institution. Highly rational and reality-oriented persons —tough-minded realists—might seem much better suited to the demands of the teaching task than are the tender-minded romantics who currently do the job. Yet this judgment of fit is not as easy to make as it first appears. As we look more closely at what goes on in an institution we begin to see how our present cadre of elementary school teachers, with all of their intellectual fuzziness and sticky sentimentality, may be doing the job better than would an army of human engineers.

One way in which the world view that has been discussed may be educationally beneficial is by prompting actions that serve as antidotes to the toxic qualities of institutional life. By being less than completely rational and methodical in his dealings with students the teacher may help to soften the impact of the impersonal institution. In a world of time schedules and objectives and tests and routines, the teacher's humanness, which includes his feelings of uncertainty and his Boy Scout idealism, stands out in bold relief.

Ideally, teachers might help to protect students in several ways from the anonymity and isolation implicit in institutional living. First, and most important, they come to know their students and to be known by them. Much of the teacher's effective knowledge as he goes about his work consists of idiosyncratic information about the particular set of students with whom he deals. Thus, the teacher may help to preserve the student's sense of personal identity by responding to him as a person, not just as a role incumbent.

Second, in some classrooms the teacher not only knows his students as persons, he also *cares* about them. He takes delight in their progress and is disappointed by their failure. This empathic response to a student's progress, or lack of it, may of course be feigned rather than genuine. But even when students come to realize that teachers, like other adults, are sometimes merely being polite in their praise and sanctimonious in their reproof, it is doubtful that these actions lose all of their effect. As we all know, a favorite device of young children when dealing with competitive claims or threats from their peers is to respond with the query: "Who cares?" The answer to that question, when it refers to matters dealing with school and school work, is usually: "The teacher."

Another aspect of the teacher's caring about his students involves his missing them when they are not there. The individual student is much less indispensable to the operation of a classroom than is his teacher. Witness the practice of hiring substitutes for teachers but not for students. It is almost as if a student's presence in a room does not really matter except to the student himself. Teachers, however, frequently note absences and often comment on them. As a result students are encouraged to feel that their own presence or absence might make a difference after all.

A third, and for our purposes, final, way in which the teacher might help to dull the sharp edges of classroom life is by presenting his students with a model of human fallibility. Unlike the computer in the records office and the electrical system that regulates the bells and buzzers, classroom teachers sometimes get angry or laugh or make mistakes or look confused. Unlike televised instructors or teaching machines or textbooks, real live teachers must often confess (if they are honest) that they do not know something or that they have made an error. Thus teachers are able to personify the virtue of possessing knowledge while at the same time demonstrating the limits of that virtue. In this way the abstract goals of learning are given a human referent. Students cannot aspire to become a computer or a teaching machine or a textbook but they can aspire to become a teacher.

At this point some readers, searching their memories of past and present dealings with elementary school teachers, may complain that the image presented here is too idealized and partakes too much of the teacher's own tendency to romanticize his work. Many teachers, it might be argued, do not really care about their students, except in the most superficial way; many do not really miss their students when they are absent, except perhaps when the absentees are teacher's pets. Moreover, the fallibility of many teachers may be so great that rather than serving as a model of the attainable they personify instead the comic and the undesirable. Add to this the

fact that many teachers act like obsequious handmaidens of school administrators and their function as human antidotes to institutional constraints begins to look like a sentimental pipe-dream.

Yet reality surely lies somewhere between the ideal and the cynical views of the teacher's function. What is more, each extreme can probably be found to exist in some classrooms. The important point is that the teacher has it within his power to dull some of the abrasive aspects of school life *if he so desires.* Moreover, certain qualities of the teacher's general outlook, his world view as it has been called here, seem like natural prerequisites for his serving to make classroom life more tolerable for students.

Clearly the teacher is not the only agent who might make the institutional aspect of school life easier to take. In most classrooms, particularly in the upper grades, there is also a well-established peer culture which is connected to activities outside the school and which operates internally to reduce discomfort, or to strengthen the student's resistance by sharing criticism, subverting regulations, ridiculing authority, and in other ways providing defenses against the more unpleasant aspects of institutional living. The student who suffers an injustice in the hands of his teacher or who chafes under the constraint of an unyielding rule can usually find solace among his peers.

But whether he gets it from his teacher or from his peers or elsewhere, the individual student often stands in need of protection, of a sort, from those qualities of classroom life that threaten his sense of uniqueness and personal worth. It is also likely that he needs this protection while he is physically present in the institution and that compensatory experiences at home or at play will not be adequate substitutes for a humane classroom environment. School comprises too large a segment of a child's life to have its effect completely neutralized by what happens after the dismissal bell rings.

Finally, this discussion reveals a fundamental ambiguity in the teacher's role. In a sense he is working for the school and against it at the same time. He has a dual allegiance—to the preservation of both the institution and the individuals who inhabit it. This double concern and the teacher's way of dealing with it imbues his work with a special quality. The social theorist Charles Horton Cooley, once pointed out that,

> An institution is a mature, specialized and comparatively rigid part of the social structure. It is made up of persons, but not of whole persons; each one enters into it with a trained and specialized part of himself . . . in antithesis to the institution, therefore, the person represents the wholeness and humanness of life. . . . A man is no man at all if he is merely a piece of an institution; he must stand also for human nature, for the instinctive, the plastic and the ideal.[7]

Paraphrasing Cooley, we might conclude that a teacher is no teacher at all if he is merely a piece of an institution. He too must stand for qualities extending beyond the official boundaries of his task. Some teachers (no one seems to know how many) recognize this fact and act accordingly.

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[7] Charles Horton Cooley, "Institutions and the person," in *Sociological Theory,* E. Borgatta and Henry J. Meyer (eds.), (New York: Knopf, 1956), p. 254.