

If the Cap Fits, Wear It

(A paradigm of philosophic equipment for beginning teachers)

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Whether teaching is an art or a science has been debated for many years. The outcome of this debate, though, is of less significance than the answers given to two basic questions: what qualities distinguish a good teacher, and what constitutes an adequate preparation for teachers who are to take their place with others in the profession? Successful practice in this profession is no different from any other profession; it evolves over time, and with practice and experience the professional teacher becomes the educator upon whom young lives depend.

Young trainees often question the value of theories imposed upon them during training. They would do well, however, to remember that for every practice there is a theory. Theories are the important concepts that initiate acceptable practices. In education, these theories are related to philosophical tenets. Our belief in human values and the purpose of education leads us to believe that theories are valuable, the guiding principles that will enhance the teacher's practised delivery of his/her experience.

To understand the essentials in the preparation of teachers, it is necessary to understand the part that teachers play in the scheme of things. First, teachers are human, belonging (like all other human beings) to the species *homo sapiens*. Second, teachers usually practise their profession in organisations designated as schools. Schools are dynamic organisations that are subject to change in many ways, not the least important agents of this change being the human beings who work and study in them. While one may be able to recognise a school as such through visual identifications, the similarity ends at that point. Schools vary considerably according to the teachers and students who inhabit them, and because the dissimilarity can be so great, they have uniqueness.

Thus the preparation of teachers is never an easy task, nor can one say that we have perfected the methods for its achievement. What is possible,

however, is to instil in the minds of young trainees the need for certain basic qualities. Proposed in this essay is a set of qualities that is aimed, if developed seriously, at appropriately preparing the new teacher to face up to the task confronting him/her with a professional attitude that, in turn, may enhance the teaching - learning process within schools. The premise for teachers to be successful is that students will be co-operative, willing to learn and receptive to the contribution being offered by teachers. In many cases this ideal does not exist. This means that teachers have to expend considerable energy on matters not directly related either to the ideal or to the theoretical underpinnings of their training. Reality has to be faced, and for centuries teachers have been making adjustments in order to meet the immediate needs of students. This is one of the early lessons learned by a young teacher at the commencement of his/her professional service.

Teaching can simultaneously be the most intellectually satisfying profession and the most frustrating one. Always present is the task of leading students to greater heights of achievement. Therefore, it becomes imperative that a guiding framework exist within the teacher to meet those challenges that confront him/her.

The preparation of teachers is based on belief in the efficacy of the experiential - learning approach. Before certification, trainee teachers have to demonstrate competence in their teaching. They usually do this during practicum, operating as teachers with classes. Many schools of education include additional preparation with 'on class' experiences such as micro-teaching, in which a student prepares and delivers a lesson to peers within the course. The lesson is videotaped, played back, and analysed by the class to determine the high points and those requiring remedial attention. While this is an artificial contrivance, it is nonetheless a valuable contribution. Another type of method that is used is the mini-teaching approach. Here the student teacher undertakes to help pupils in need of remedial assistance. The student teacher is able to see the impact of his/her effort over time. These methods are but a few of those adopted in the training of teachers.

But what are the essentials in the preparation of teachers? What should teachers be expected to have upon graduation? I attempted to answer these questions when I was asked recently by Professor Bruce Gordon at Auburn University, Montgomery, to speak to his class of elementary-school-oriented graduate students who were preparing to become teachers

in the State of Alabama. I styled my talk 'If the cap fits . . .' Certainly, if the cap fits, wear it. Teaching is very much like that — whatever you do, you wear it.

The formula that evolved is based on a set of principles that, I believe, should be the constituents of each teacher. I do not suggest that the list of desirable 'tenets' is strictly limited to those proposed, but rather that these eighteen elements are assumed to be a basic minimum for every teacher.

Thus we have **CAP, a paradigm for commencing teachers**, three alliterative sets of principles for teachers in training and for young commencing teachers.

**The C group: content, consistency, concern,
commitment, clarity, consideration**

Content It is essential that each teacher has command of the subject matter that he/she will teach. Without a thorough background, the teacher is forced into extensive preparation to gain the knowledge to be imparted to pupils. Content includes materials, self-knowledge, knowledge of the matter itself as well as knowledge directly related to the subject, and, of course, experience. There is no limit to the extension of knowledge, which is one of the challenges.

Consistency This implies evenness in one's behaviour, beliefs and powers of judgement. Children are creatures of habit and respond best in situations where they know what is expected of them. The rewards accruing to the teacher who is consistent are numerous. By the same token, children find inconsistency both disturbing and intolerable.

Concern Concern for other human beings should be a quality in every teacher's kit. But there also has to be concern for the total effort of the school. The school is an equation in which the summation of parts creates the whole, and it must be all the parts.

Commitment Because of the demanding nature of teaching and the variety of responsibilities confronting the teacher, it is essential that he/she be committed to the task, to the profession, and to the students.

Clarity It is essential for the teacher to be clear on everything about the task to be accomplished, about the information, and about directions, commands and messages. Ambiguous messages can be disturbing, disruptive and dysfunctional, not only organisationally but also on a personal level. The misunderstanding of a message may cause many problems, so the sender must take care to make the message clear to the receiver.

Consideration All pupils should be shown consideration with equal attention and warmth. Consideration also refers to understanding others' feelings, misgivings and frailties. No matter who we are, each one of us is sensitive and has feelings that require judicious consideration.

The A group: aim, attitude, attendance, alertness, acceptance, ability

Aim The teacher should be focused on a constellation of related qualities, values that are cherished by society and should therefore be adopted if the teacher is to instruct pupils and lead them to adulthood. These qualities to aim for are honesty, openness, truthfulness and trustworthiness.

Attitude It is not always easy to face each day jovially and with confidence. It seems, however, that this is what is expected of teachers. The teacher, irrespective of personal disappointments, difficulties or tragedies, is expected to come up smiling. I have always advised my students not to take their personal problems into the classroom. Be positive in attitude and action; be positive in your work; and take a positive approach when considering individuals.

Attendance A teacher's life and commitment mean regular attendance at school. But another important aspect of attendance in a teacher's life is an inbuilt clock that regulates his/her behaviour. Time is of the essence. Classes begin at a certain time and they end at a certain time. Therefore time awareness assumes importance for the teacher. It is important that tardiness be eliminated; it is essential to be on time.

Alertness One should be alert. As a teacher, take note of what is seen

and heard, and be aware of what is going on about you. Understand what activities pupils are planning. Be alert to a changed disposition of pupils: sometimes, noticing a change in a child can uncover serious problems within that child.

Acceptance A teacher should avoid prejudgement and condemnation of deficiencies. A teacher should accept children as they are. The teacher's role is to develop that child. Each child has a right to learn.

Ability In the teacher's bag of tricks there should be space for the ability to handle difficult situations calmly and dispassionately. Children expect adults to show positive leadership, and to handle situations with knowledge, justice, consideration and expertise.

The P group: proficiency, presentation, pride, personnel, programming, personality.

Proficiency It is incumbent on the teacher to be not only efficient and organised, but also in complete command of the self, the situation and the overall effort. In work outside of instruction, it is important to be proficient --- every task has its demands. The overall effort is improved when each participant accepts the challenge.

Presentation Children are very observant, and because the teacher is most often at the front of the room, he/she is under the constant scrutiny of discerning eyes. Therefore, the teacher becomes the model, the exemplar. Be neat and tidy, and set a good example for emulation.

Pride Take pride in the self. But also take pride in your work and everything you do. Take pride in your profession and participate earnestly in its enhancement.

Personnel The school team consists of people. As a member of that team, be conscious of the contributions made by each member. The administrator should always be considerate of the personnel in the school, as should each member of the team be of all the others.

Programming and planning In the preparation of teaching material and

activity, where attention to details ensures a smooth operation, programming and planning are essential.

Personality Continue to develop your own personality. A happy disposition is always welcome in a school. Do not take everything too seriously, and do try to develop the ability to laugh at yourself.

This is not an exhaustive list, but any young teacher having these attributes would be welcome anywhere throughout the world. It is a cap worth wearing.