Teaching as a Profession

Thesis

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By

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Teaching as a Profession.

Among the questions demanding our attention at the present time, none are more important, none more worthy of thoughtful consideration than those concerning the education of the youth of our land. It is no longer a question of education or no education; this has been definitely settled, and the vital importance of education as a means of preservation alone is no longer doubted. Statistics, the innumerable arguments of the enlightened statesman, tell us that ignorance, pauperism, and crime go hand in hand. Eighty per cent of the crimes of the United States is committed by the illiterate class; and while one out of ten of the ignorant element is a pauper, the ratio among the educated is one to one hundred. It has also been decided to whom the facilities of gaining an education are to be extended. The right of all to an education and the duty of the state to furnish it is no longer seriously questioned. Free schools have become as much a fixed principle of our government as free thought and free religion.

And yet, the subject of education is largely a debatable one. Our public school system is still in the process of formation. It was a great conception, founded with a grand purpose, but is far from being completed. It is very comprehensiveness necessitate a slow growth and working out of the details. Many, too short-sighted to see what is
their best good, refuse its professed gifts, and will continue to do so until compulsory laws are no longer a debatable theory, but a fact. Thus, when all else is settled comes the question of quality. How good are education must our public schools furnish?

It is the teacher to whom we must look to work out this portion of the problem. Upon him more than upon the curriculum pursued, right education depends. Upon the teacher, to a great extent, rests the duty of forming the characters as well as of moulding the minds of the pupils. The teacher has always to supplement influence, and often is called upon to overcome and correct the evil tendencies there acquired. Upon our teachers of to-day depend the men and women of tomorrow.

We present the singular spectacle of a nation of teachers with very few professional teachers. At present teaching seems to be any and every body's business—being mostly left to the young and inexperienced or those whose force of circumstances has compelled to continue in the work. There are some noticeable exceptions, especially in the higher positions; but in the main, teaching is made a stepping stone to something else. Boys and girls not yet out of their teens, too inexperienced to get any other responsible position, daily find employment as teachers. The young man who intends to go into the mercantile business finds the shortest and surest way to a little capital is through the school room. Young lawyers took and read Blackstone of evenings;
young doctors teach while fitting themselves for their profession. Students teach to defray their expenses at college, at the same time keeping up their regular studies. All this is regarded as nothing out of the way. An opinion seems to prevail that schooling is simply a matter of time spent at a place of learning, and that it matters not who does the teaching as long as a certain amount of it is done. Too often we see ignorance teaching ignorance in our schools—the blind leading the blind.

Of these ignorant, inexperienced teachers there are two kinds. The one is actuated by purely selfish motives. He teaches for money and has no more interest in his work nor works more intelligently than the ignorant laborer who shovels dirt on the highway. He works listlessly, indifferently; cares nothing for the result or for success. There are other schools which pay as much and which he may easily obtain. The other, is willing to work and tries to earn his wages. But willing, nay the a good qualification when coupled with ignorance becomes a source of harm. The young doctor will undertake operations which the old, gray-headed surgeon hesitates to attempt, and would rather a more skilful man should do. Both these teachers are totally unfit for the work. The one is its indifferent to do good; the other does positive harm. He can only give of what he has,—half-truths, garbled facts, fallacies. He is the teacher who furnishes powder and ball for the demagogue.
No education is better than wrong education. If writing as we must that much of the common-school education of the day is a very poor article is our system of schools altogether to blame for this? Because we have thus far failed in carrying out the second part of the grand principle upon which it was founded: "Schools for all and good enough for the best," must we condemn the whole system and abandon the principle? Though Richard Grant White insists that this the only remedy he will never succeed in making the American people believe. If we destroy the half-grown orange because it has not the perfection of the ripened fruit, or crush the opening bud because it has not the beauty of the full-blown rose. Our school system is no mushroom growth to be shriveled by the first scorching breath of criticism. It has spread from a local New England institution to national proportions, simply by its eminent adaptability to American society. It was not moral, however, that its democratic character should be its strongest recommendation to a people like ours. To the unenlightened pioneer, the notion of what constitutes and education must be a very vague one, but a school house in close proximity to his homestead where his children may receive advantages which were denied him, is a material form of a principle which commands it to the most unlettered. It is now too late to question the policy of thus increasing
The number of schools is rapidly at the expense of their quality. We have the school houses and with us remains the duty of filling them with teachers who will make them "good enough for the best."

How may we accomplish this? How may we make the whole body of our teachers conscientious, painstaking educators? How may we raise teaching from the low position which it now occupies to the proper position among the professions? These are the questions we should earnestly endeavor to solve.

This cannot be done as knowledge of its alone made the basis of qualification. It is true that this is an important requisite, but is the teacher stock in trade his capital. But capital alone is not sufficient for any business. Capital in the hands of one who does business regardless of the laws which control its successful investment, is frittered away in enterprises bearing of profit to himself or others. The merchant to be successful, need something more than an ability to tell woolen from cotton fabrics. In law, medicine or engineering there are certain cardinal principles peculiar to each which must first be mastered by him who would succeed at either of these callings. It is true to a greater degree of teaching. In no profession is it more necessary that one should work at all times intelligently - with a clear conception of the nature and requirements of his work. The teacher deals with the human soul. On him and on his knowledge of the laws
and principles of its growth, it depends whether that soul will attain a perfect, symmetrical growth, or become a stunted, miserable dwarf—deprived of life's highest pleasures, and a clog upon the upward progress of humanity. It is a great responsibility and earnest and careful should be the preparation for it, its duties fully understood before attempted.

An attempt has been made of late years to meet this need of professional training by the establishment of normal schools. While a means of good in this direction the results are far from being satisfactory. Actinely they are for the purpose of giving a purely professional education to teachers; this is the only reason for their existence. We have high schools and academies and universities established by the state for general instruction. Our normal schools have managed much of their work. The greater part of course is the same as that pursued in our graded schools, with a term or two of didactics at the end of the course for those who complete it. As model schools they of course, train pupils in right methods of teaching; but no more than any well conducted grade school. As places where pupils are trained especially for teaching they must, judging by the pupils they graduate, be pronounced wanting. It would naturally look to see those taking the leading in the ranks of educators. Is this the case? On the contrary, tho' they give us many good teachers, they do not furnish as many in proportion to their members as
our academies and universities. Nor does a greater percent of the graduates of normal schools make teaching their life work. So long as they do not restrict themselves to their peculiar province, so long will they be filled with students seeking a general and not a special education— to such an extent do they betray the trust confided to them.

A purely normal course of one year, to enter which the applicant must have already acquired proficiency as scholar, such as has been recently established at the northern normal in this state, is a great step forward. But why not have such departments in our universities? The great distinction between the modern university which has to a great extent superseded the college of the past is, that in it a course of special study may be pursued with a view of entering a certain profession. We have chairs of Law, Theology, and Medicine, and why not have chairs of Pedagogy, where the science of education may be taught? It would certainly demand toward bringing teaching on a level with the other professions; would give it dignity and worth in the eyes of learned men, and would ultimately raise it in the estimation of the people. This would in turn attract talent, for talent goes where public opinion dictates. Law gains many members simply because it is fashionable for all smart young men to go into that pro-
fession. Engineering has won many of our ablest young men of
late years by being given an honorable position in our
university bureau. Here, too, can the teacher best realize that
broad, liberal culture prominently demanded in his vocation.

There must also be made a greater difference between ex-
perience and inexperience in the matter of wages. Our school has
no longer outnumbers our teachers, and we are no longer compelled
to pay a premium in order to get teachers to fill them. The time
has come when a judicious and discriminating use the compensating
power may be made a lever for advancing the profession. A just
complaint is made that our teachers are not adequately compensated.
The trouble is, however, that not so much that there is not enough
paid out for teaching, as that it is paid too indiscriminately. The
same amount of money now paid our teachers, used in prop-
erly graded salaries, while not depriving the natives of a living re-
novation, would give to him a hint who has toiled for years
a salary more nearly corresponding to what he ought expect
from equal devotion of time and energies in one of the other professions.

The young man who enters law, does so understanding that
there is a long "starving time" of drudgery to be gone through
at the outset of his career. In the natural course of events, influ-
ence and honors come only with gray hairs in any profession.
It is a common objection to teaching as a profession, that its highest place is soon reached—that the teacher, if anywhere successful, will get a fair salary, but that when service-worn veteran he only gets a fair salary still. It is no serious objection to the calling, to him who intends to make teaching his life work, that he must begin in a subordinate position, or a moderate salary, so long as there is a glittering prize to be won at the end. It would cut off only those who teach because they can for the time being get better pay at that than at anything else.

Closely connected with this subject is that of examinations. Our examinations of teachers should be more rigid and certificates then given for a longer period. Our system at present is such as to encourage a transient teaching element. Yearly our teachers in the common schools are under the necessity of undergoing and examinations. These examinations utterly fail in their purpose of disqualifying poor teachers, and tend to lessen the liking of good teachers for the calling. Whatever his success has been, the teachers must subject himself to a periodical cross-questioning on the S. B. C. of his calling, or seek other employment. Though perhaps a small one, it is a source of annoyance and opposed to that feeling of faith and security which forms a large element of the spirit due Corps of every profession. What we need in this direction we
examinations conducted by a board of experienced educators, which shall first determine the thorough fitness of the candidate and his adaptation for the work. Then, if after a period of trial he under a careful supervision he is proven worthy a place in our grand body of teachers, he should be made a life member.

no artificial stimulus by means of examinations can induce progress in proficiency. We must trust that universal dislike for stagnation, that innate desire for promotion which men possess, to carry our teachers forward in the good work.

There are no more hopeful sign of the advancing state of teaching as a profession than the teachers associations which are springing up throughout the country. Our teachers institutes are something of the same nature, but are not an equal power in cultivating a professional spirit. They are more nearly akin to the normal schools in methods and results. Much of their time is taken up in an attempt to impart knowledge which every teacher ought already to know. The notion that the prime requisite for teaching is a knowledge of textbooks is here carried to a ridiculous extreme. Days in a short session of a month, week or two, are spent in a discussion of the Roman Notation or the sound of a in "bear." In their discussions they discourage all individuality in teachings. They inoculate the
the idea that there is a cast-iron rule for imparting knowledge, an undeviating method through which certain facts are to be safely transferred from book or the mind of the teacher to the mind of the pupil. In our national and state associations an entirely different spirit seems to prevail. Here the brightest and best intellects in the profession meet and discuss the broad underlying principles of education and of social progress. Greater self-respect and increased appreciation of their work by all who take part in such discussions is the result. Through these associations the leaders put vigor into the rank and file.

The signs of the times all indicate that teaching is rapidly advancing to its proper place among the professions. That it will become a calling to which it will be an honor to belong, toward which talent will gravitate and where it will find ample opportunity for employment and advancement is only a question of time.