

Educational Men and Matters

LACK OF PERMANENCY IN THE TEACHING PROFESSION

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From the institution of public schools in Canada until the present time one of the most marked characteristics of the work of the teacher has been its lack of permanency. A generation or two ago almost every young man who entered the classroom as teacher apparently did so with the intention of making teaching a stepping-stone to some more lucrative occupation. In those days there were fewer women teachers, but, like the man, they were birds of passage, and, after teaching for a shorter or longer period, the great majority disappeared from the ranks to reign in other spheres—more attractive if not more lucrative.

By thoughtful fathers and mothers it was recognized that their children were being taught mainly by apprentices, and by apprentices, too, who had no intention of becoming journeymen. If this criticism now and then found a voice, it was probably answered by the argument that the country was poor and could not afford to pay for maturity and long experience in the persons of the instructors of the young.

But Canada is no longer a poor country. The standard of living has risen steadily during the last thirty years, and, if permanency in the teaching profession is desirable, the country is quite rich enough to pay for it.

Some good people seriously contend that permanency in the calling of the teacher is not really desirable. A successful business man once remarked to me: "If I had my way I should forbid any man or woman to teach longer than seven years." I suppose he believed that it was impossible for the average teacher to retain his energy and enthusiasm for a more extended period.

But in what esteem should we hold the qualifications of the lawyers or medical men of a certain community if it were generally understood that they meant to practise these professions for only a few short years, and had quite other plans regarding their life work? I think we should go elsewhere for advice in cases of serious business difficulty or critical illness.

Some years ago a committee investigated the work of a hundred admittedly successful teachers of long experience. It was found that not one of the hundred had attained his maximum efficiency short of seven years' experience, whilst the average period required to reach this standard was about fourteen years. If the case of these hundred is typical, then it is clear that a very large number, in all likelihood the great majority of our teachers, drop out of the work before they are capable of doing their best.

This, surely is a state of things that demands at once the most earnest thought and the most decided action. In education nothing short of the best is good enough for our children or our nation. But the evil cannot be remedied in a day or in a year. Where, indeed, does the remedy lie? Clearly in inducing a very large number of our teachers to make teaching their life work.

But to try to induce any very large proportion of our women teachers to make this calling their life-work is as useless as it is undesirable. In every age of sanity the home must constitute the sphere of greatest usefulness and of highest honour to the great majority of women. If, therefore, for the sake of our boys and girls, the profession of teaching is to become in any measure a permanent profession, men in much larger numbers than at present, must be induced to enter upon the work and to remain in it. In the year 1909 only

about ten per cent of the students in the normal schools of Ontario were men; ten years later the percentage had fallen to four. Ten years ago about a third of the high school teachers of Ontario were women. At present the sexes are about equally represented in these schools.

The practical question remains—How can we induce a fair proportion of our brightest young men to take up teaching as a life-work? The answer is by making its rewards sufficiently attractive. The circumstances cited in the previous paragraph are the best proof that the present rewards are not proving sufficiently attractive, and that to make them sufficiently attractive they must be considerably enhanced. In short I should say that we must offer a young man who has finished his pedagogical training a salary sufficient to enable him to marry at say from twenty-five to twenty-eight years of age, and to bring up a family in decency and average comfort.

But we must do more than this. We must make the more distant outlook more attractive. A prudent young man may be content to put up with limited means in his earlier professional years, if the rewards promised him in middle and later life are sufficiently generous. He sees that the man who has had average success in law or medicine is comfortably off when he reaches middle life. Granted good health and freedom from unusual mischance such an one can look forward to old age without misgiving. He sees, on the other hand, that for the teacher who has had average success, and has reached middle life, the outlook is far less cheering. For him there is still the struggle to make ends meet: the balance at the bank is still painfully small: at sixty-five or seventy, of not long before, he will be deemed to have outlived his usefulness in the classroom, and his power and opportunity to earn even a scanty livelihood will then have become precarious.

The wise young man seeing all this may well be pardoned for deciding that he will run no such hazard, that his choice will be a more prudent one.

The inference is plain. If, I repeat, for the sake of our boys and girls, and for the sake of our nation, teaching is to be a permanent profession, we must in the first place offer such recompense as will induce a sufficiently large number of bright young men to take it up, and we must assure them of such income in middle life as will enable them to make provision for old age, and such as will not separate them too far socially from school and college friends of no greater ability who have been perhaps more worldly wise in visualizing the future.

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