

Why Be a Teacher? Rewards Do Exist

By PETER GIBBON

WHAT ambitious American boy (and now what ambitious American girl) ever said he wanted to be a teacher? Teachers are poorly paid, do not advance and are not given status. They do not invent anything, produce anything, sell anything. In a hustling, competitive, scientific, technological world, teachers have no tangible signs of achievement and thus are given no honorary degrees and little recognition. Anyone can become a teacher, and there is no career ladder. One does not become a senior partner with increased responsibility and the accompanying deference. In short, teaching is not a glamorous profession. In obscurity, one labors for a pittance.

Teaching is also isolating and lonely. One performs in private for a youthful audience. Teaching cannot be taught. There is no science or technology of teaching. One is unsure of what to do or how well he is doing it. The teacher must repeat low-level material to those who would rather be anywhere else than in the classroom. He must retain an enthusiasm for the obvious. Some sociologists have even gone so far as to claim that teaching actually reduces a personality.

The news from the 1980's about the job of teaching is not much more

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cheery than the grim sociological commentary. Even the most casual reader of educational literature cannot help stumbling across articles exposing:

¶Salaries that do not match inflation or other jobs requiring a college degree.

¶Teachers who regret their career choice.

¶Layoffs because of dwindling budgets and fewer students.

¶Embarrassingly low test scores of aspiring teachers.

¶Talented women boycotting teaching.

¶Obsessive talk of teacher "burn-out."

¶Accusations that some teachers are as illiterate as their students and should be called to account.

¶Falling student test scores.

¶Doubts about the value of a liberal arts or humanistic education.

¶Doubts from some sociologists as to whether, compared with family and society, school makes much of a difference.

This poor image of teaching is even more cause for concern than the negative sociological commentary because the media reaches millions, whereas the sociologist touches only a few. No wonder a key concern of high school principals is how they will attract able teachers once the tenured retire and the current surplus is exhausted.

So why be a teacher? What about satisfactions that teachers reluctantly confess, that questionnaires do not reveal, that sociologists slight?

There is the exhilaration of explain-

ing something that one has complete command of, that is personally important and important for the advancement of civilization, and then watching another catch on and even sometimes become excited. There is the satisfaction of opening new worlds to parochial, jaded adolescents, of winning a class over and watching them respond to their better selves.

This year I taught "Henry IV" for the first time. I like to watch their faces when, after wrestling with a difficult plot and what seems impenetrable language, they start to sense the elegance, economy, insight and humor of their greatest writer.

I like describing to them an Elizabethan world that is somewhat different than Westchester County and watching their wonder and shock. I like the challenge of their naïve questions and forcing them to come up with their own explanations and hypotheses, deliberately withholding answers, and then, when they are finished fumbling, drawing upon years of experience and reading to seize the apt explanation.

I like the performance and the banter, the negotiating over work, the energy and irreverence of students, the daily struggle to overcome inertia and apathy and, above all, being part of a group in the pursuit of something significant.

In a specialized world a teacher is a generalist and a dilettante, and his reading enlivens the classroom. In a capitalistic, materialistic society, where some people feel queasy or guilty about what they are doing,

about merely getting and spending, a teacher has the luxury of doing something semialtruistic — helping and elevating others.

In a hierarchical society, where many wait 10 years to do anything interesting, he is given full responsibility immediately. And, of course, he has taken vows of poverty and can even feel self-righteous. Regular and long vacations are not mentioned when teachers cite the occupational blues. I find strenuous work, punctuated by holidays, preferable to the 52-week grind.

I am aware of sullen apathy, the grind of five classes, the torture of last period, the daily struggle to extract homework and to get proper books and paper on the desk; of the unending pile of sloppy and unsophisticated and perfunctory papers, the slow progress of most, the poverty of their vocabulary, the sameness of the years, the ingratitude and mercenary attitude toward learning of many parents and students.

Nevertheless, every September I am driven back to my classroom by satisfactions not easily described but powerful — principally, the joy of explaining something important, the artistry involved in cajoling the young to learn, when they would prefer to be idle and frivolous. And finally, there is the occasional moment when 20 lonely, sullen, selfish, immature individuals transform themselves into a class, emanating good will and sharing serious ideas, clarifying the vague and half-understood and discovering new worlds.

