Undercover Teacher

Slow Pupils Cheated by Our Schools

Staff writer George N. Allen has just emerged from two months as a teacher in one of the city’s “difficult” schools—John Marshall Junior High in Brooklyn. Mr. Allen was assigned to obtain a teacher’s job for the school, JHS 210, to learn firsthand the experiences of a teacher there, the attitudes and aptitudes of the students, the day-to-day problems of classroom instruction. He obtained a substitute teacher’s position after having met all necessary requirements. In this article, the eighth in the series, he tells short-cut teaching methods used by teachers.

By GEORGE N. ALLEN.
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I got the surprise of my teaching life one morning early in October.

I walked into the classroom of another teacher at JHS 210 to see how he was teaching hygiene to a group of “adjustment” pupils—neither of the groups I taught. By this time, I was aware of the learning limitations of my own “adjustment” (slow learning) students. And I was curious to see how other teachers were handling the other ones.

It is not my intent to embarrass any individual at the school where I taught for two months as a qualified English instructor, so the teacher in this class I visited shall remain nameless. But this is what I saw in his room.

Blackboard Covered.

The blackboard in the front of the room was almost completely covered with writing—various hygiene topics and questions related to the topics. But I was flabbergasted by what I read.

Even I, a teacher, couldn’t understand many of the scientific terms written on the blackboard. The material included the Latin names of the parts of the body.

I walked up to the teacher, who at that point was writing still more questions on the board.

“Do these children know the answers to these questions?” I asked in amazement.

“Certainly,” he replied with conviction, “they have the answer to every question. Just look in their notebooks. You’ll find every answer there.”

The teacher, seeing the lack of understanding in my expression, smiled knowingly and dug me in the ribs.

“Of course, most of them can’t understand the answers they have copied,” he explained. “But for the record, they have the answers, all neatly written in their books.”

I still didn’t quite understand.

“You mean,” I asked, “that previously you’ve given these...

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"Sure," he replied. "And they didn't know what they were copying?"
"Of course not. Even you probably don't understand some of the terms."

"I didn't and I wondered why the phonetic lesson was such a success."

He explained his reason:

"I found the system simple for me, so I make the adjustment classes copy the lessons I have already given in an average or superior class. I know these adjustment lessons aren't learning anything, but under the teaching conditions we have today, I couldn't teach them anything even if I really tried. This way is a lot easier on me."

"Besides, if a supervisor happens to walk in, you have a neat lesson on the board which no one can complain about."

Outright Fraud.

I was appalled. This seemed to me to be an outright fraud not only on the children, but on the taxpayers.

Seeing my look of disgust, the teacher hastened to explain:

"Don't get me wrong, Mr. Allen," he said. "The adjustment kids like this method better, too. They feel they are getting the same work as the kids in the average or superior classes, even though they don't have the foggiest idea what they're writing down."

Later that week I tried the teacher's system with my adjustment students and found that it worked. With that system you try to make kids think they are learning from the adjustment class all at. Just make them copy the lesson of the last average class.

One of Best.

This fellow teacher, I learned, is one of the best and hardest working teachers at John Marshall Junior High School. He simply is the victim of an educational system which has qualified teachers an impossible job.

I tried his system for a week. It worked like a charm. I had peace and quiet and I had time to do the endless administrative paper work.

But, while it paid off for me, it didn't pay off for these kids. They were short-changed.

The reader may ask: What about tests? Why, if the children aren't learning, should they be given tests?

Tests are popular with teachers of adjustment classes at JHS 210 for one simple reason—they consume time. Instead of REXographing (duplicating) the questions on sheets of paper, the pupils can complete the answers in one period, a teacher told me to "put the questions on the board. That way, it takes them one period to copy the questions and another whole period to write the answers and you use up two periods instead of one."

Typical of the questions which teachers use in their tests are:

The name of our school is

Our principal's name is

Our school is located at

One whole period to copy these and similar questions another whole period the following day to give the answers. These are examples of how slow learners in our junior high schools are being hoodwinked.

But average children are hoodwinked, too. I was asked by another teacher to allow her official average class to rehearse its school play during some English periods it spent with me. I agreed.

Play Rehearsals.

Later I was discussing the proposal with a third teacher. I wanted to know if it was proper to have play rehearsals during instruction periods. My colleague replied:

"Sure, that's great. It will use up quite a few periods for you. Rehearsing is easier than teaching English, isn't it?"

And taxpaying parents, too, are being hoodwinked. One day a teacher was searching for his record book in which he kept the marks and grades for all his students. He complained that if he didn't find it, he would have to read over many test papers again and enter hundreds of marks.

"Don't bother," said another teacher. "I'd never enter marks in my record book. Last year when Open School Week rolled around, I tucked the blank book under my arm and went down to meet the parents."

"When a parent came up to me and asked, 'How is Johnny doing?' I read her a whole column of marks off the blank page. I did great. The only trouble I had was with a few noisy ones who kept trying to peek over the top of the book to see the marks for themselves."

Here's Why Illiterates Get Into Junior High

How can it be that illiterate boys and girls are promoted into junior high school? Surely, not because they read. Why do school authorities keep up the face that they are educating children who are hardly ever past reading names?

The Answers.

These questions are being asked by scores of World Telegram and Sun readers. Here are the answers:

In New York State, education laws bind educators to keep children in school until they are 17, regardless of their ability, aptitudes or achievement.

A child can be released from school at age 16 to go to work. But he cannot go on to continuation school four hours a week until he is 17.

100 Percent Promotion.

From the practical point of view, it would seem that it is simply a matter of policy. Every child at 17 is made to go to work, and if he is not and if he is not, the school authorities have no other recourse than to promote him.

Also, educational theories have resulted in a policy of 100 percent promotion. In the last few decades. This policy is a by-product of the progressive education movement. Its advocates held that schoolchildren should be graded by age and not by achievement.

A 13-year-old may be held back manually and socially, but modern educators believe it is better to hold back in classes with his peers. Also, they maintain, keeping a child back does not help him to learn better, but instead gives him a feeling of defeat and frustration.

New York City's school system has had an officially-recognized policy of 100 percent promotion for many years. But, in practice, almost every child was assured of promotion.

In the last two years, the traditional practice in this city, being replaced by a new policy today is that no child can be promoted if he is more than two years behind in reading.

Opposed by Theobald.

Superintendent of Schools John J. Theobald is on record against 100 percent promotion.

When World Telegram staff writer George Allen was teaching at John Marshall Junior High School, a fellow teacher called him one afternoon how many of his students he intended to graduate.

"I don't know," he replied. "I just don't know. I will use up quite a few of them to do even sixth grade work and, as far as I can see, some should graduate. But some are good kids who are trying hard. No one has yet told me what standard I should use to determine who should graduate and who shouldn't."

I guess I'll leave it up to the school authorities to tell me what they want me to do."