

Teachers and the School of Education

by Burton Blatt

In a formal academic convocation tomorrow afternoon at Hendricks Chapel, the School of Education will begin celebrating the 50th anniversary of the awarding of its first doctorate in education, in 1934. A year-long series of academic and social events is planned. Campus Calendar in this issue of The Record has details of tomorrow's convocation and a brunch party on Saturday.

Since 1976, Burton Blatt, who joined the faculty in 1969, has been dean of the School of Education. In this essay, originally prepared as a report to the SU board of trustees in November 1982, Dean Blatt discusses the role of a school of education and its faculty in a university.

In schools of education, professors and teachers have common and enduring bonds. Consequently, it may be appropriate to begin this discussion with what occurs in the relationship. It's ironic that the college which prepares teachers is almost universally assigned the lowest status in a university. It's ironic, because most people in Western society think of education as one's obligation. And, if that's true—or even believed—isn't teaching a valued (if not sacred) occupation?

Professors of education are as often as not viewed with amusement (if not derision) by their colleagues in arts and sciences and professional schools—this despite the shared belief that education represents the developmental link between the child in the first grade and the man or woman about to receive the Ph.D. That is, what goes on in that first grade, or the high school class in calculus very much shapes the lives of future inventors, discoverers, scholars of all stripes, as well as the shakers and movers of society. Notwithstanding, there do not appear to be many people greatly exercised when there is a teacher shortage. Conversely, few are

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Burton Blatt, dean of the SU School of Education, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. (Photo Center)

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overly appreciative when there is a teacher surplus.

Teacher shortages or surpluses appear to be viewed as minor problems which will adjust themselves by the natural fine-tuning of the marketplace. If there are too many teachers today, fewer will enter teaching training programs tomorrow, so that shortly there will be just enough to meet the needs; conversely, if there aren't enough teachers to meet all perceived needs, there will be special recruitment programs which will quickly adjust for the temporary need.

What occurs quite regularly in teacher education would be unthinkable in other fields. For example, if the medical schools were to announce that there will shortly be a surplus of doctors, would the news be cause for alarm? No. Indeed, there might be a sort of mini-national celebration. With the surplus, it might even be possible to find a doctor willing to make a house call. And what if there were to be a doctor shortage? The solution to the problem would not be found in special intensive programs to prepare doctors.

This is all by way of saying that in other professions, shortages and surpluses are not dealt with through a process of hit or miss market corrections. Why in education? The question begets another question: How valuable is education to society?

The business of a university is the life of the mind. Whether to discover or create, whether to illuminate or portray, whether to define the world, the community of scholars is devoted to activities of mind at its highest but also its most human level. But a community of scholars, as such, is necessarily incomplete. By itself, it could only endure for the span of one generation's mature years. The life of the mind, like every other life, extends itself only through a concern with the young—by making certain that the young will not only inherit but build on the achievements of the old.

A university expresses this fundamental concern through support of its school of education. There is a cloud over education, quite old and enduring, but exacerbated several years ago by abrupt declines in school enrollments. And schools of education find themselves with a government bent on disassembling its support for education and a society which appears to have lost faith and patience in its schools, its teachers, and the institutions which serve those purposes (or possibly a society which has more expectations of—more faith in—education than the educators themselves). Today, schools of education sometimes bear greater resemblance to funeral parlors than centers for higher learning.

What of the future? Will the student declines in our public schools and schools of education continue? Will the clouds become storms? The answers to such questions seem clear enough to us. The university that takes no interest in education ignores the foundation for its survival. By being concerned with education, the university establishes the basis for a society in which the scholarly life is likely. The relationship between what occurs in the first grade class and what occurs at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton is important if ambiguous.

So we ask rhetorically: What can a university expect from its school of education in return for its support and encouragement during these bleak days? And the response: While the arts and sciences may legitimately

represent the core of knowledge of the university, the school of education may deserve recognition as the primary place that "worries" about the conditions under which people learn. While a college of arts and sciences transmits knowledge (as, indeed, all schools of a university do), the school of education is concerned with not only the transmittal—the teaching—but the learning.

Of course, good teachers everywhere "worry" about learning, but even **those** teachers take learning more for granted than their teaching. Good teachers worry about teaching. In a school of education, we deliberately study teachers and learners. We deliberately examine the ethos, the mechanisms, the tools of the teaching-learning interaction. We have a fundamental concern with the transmission of knowledge and skills. "Everyone" is concerned with eating. But farmers are concerned in a different way. **Their** "worrying" about it results in people having enough food.

In that sense, the school of education is more central to a university than many other schools in the university—many others with higher enrollments and greater prestige. A university can exist not only without an engineering school, for example, but without deliberate attention to the field of engineering. Or a medical school. Or a law school. How can a university exist without people in its community devoted to the education of its students?

The centrality of the school of education is further buttressed by its influence beyond the university's boundaries—and that returns us to the metaphor of Einstein and first grade children. There is a direct connection between how well a freshman student does in calculus and how well he was taught in the elementary and high school. On the university campus, education must be the business not only of those concerned with the preparation of teachers but of all of its professors. This concern must go beyond the appointment of "dual professors." A university community must not only seek to understand what **all** of its students and teachers do, but also what elementary and high schools are like, where our teachers come from, what our communities do for their schools, what our society wants from its schools.

The "problem" with our schools and with our schools of education isn't merely in education, but with society. The "problem" with education on the campus of a research university isn't merely in the school of education but in the university. Of course, such an idea complicates the issues before us, but also offers opportunity as well as complication. Education is concerned with life and death. That is, those who aren't concerned with education are in a sense choosing cultural death—extinction of the society as we know it, and as we want it to become.

Again, what would occur if medical schools reported that there is a surplus of doctors? Would such news provoke national emergency or celebration? Wouldn't most of us be relieved to learn that, from now on, only plumbers aren't to be disturbed on Sunday? Or suppose there was a doctor shortage? Would the people be satisfied with the explanation that shortages follow surpluses, that the market will adjust itself? No. And the people shouldn't be satisfied with such explanations concerning teachers. That's the problem. That too is the challenge.