

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Seymour Sarason: Sculptor of Ideas

A Walking Contradiction

Seymour Bernard Sarason is a man on whom we might bestow a most unusual set of labels: “cheerful curmudgeon,” “dour optimist,” “cautious radical,” “pragmatic idealist,” “doubtful visionary.” And these oxymorons are not the only lenses through which to observe this most contradictory scholar. Is he, essentially, a psychologist or an educator? An academic or a practitioner? A writer or an activist? Is he a champion of school reformers or a persistent gadfly of the school reform movement?

Is Sarason, at heart, a psychologist who has adopted public education as his field of practice, or is he an educational philosopher who uses his background in psychology to try to help us understand why our schools are failing? If an educator, what is his specialty—education for students with disabilities or general education? Why does he staunchly defend classroom teachers in one breath and then scold them roundly for their failure to read the professional literature? Who has he decided deserves the blame for the persistent failure of schools to become interesting places for children and teachers to learn—teacher preparatory institutions or teacher unions? Building principals or district policymakers? Local, state, or national government leaders? And whom does he call on to solve endemic educational problems—the president of the United States or an ad hoc group of parents and teachers who ought to get rid of the school board and the principal and take control of local schools?

And, if one should claim that Seymour Sarason is, at one and the same time, *all* of these people, that he holds forth on *every one* of these seemingly contradictory positions, how can he avoid being viewed by academic experts as someone who spreads himself much too thinly, to the detriment of good scholarship?

Why should we take this man seriously, when no governor, education secretary, or academic dean—in *any* of the disciplines he writes about—seems to have adopted his philosophy? Why bother to collect selections from this man's forty-odd published books, when it is so hard to get a handle on just what kind of scholar he really *is*?

Seymour Sarason would himself entertain these questions—with a heavy dose of skepticism. He begins each new book with a chapter entitled something like, “Who Really Needs a Book Like This, Anyway?” In private, and in public, he is his own severest critic, even though he declines to view himself in terms of the contradictions that have been noted. As he disclosed in a recent conversation, he sees himself rather as a man “continually adding to an individual mosaic of ideas.” He described himself as someone who pursues apparently contradictory thoughts “until the fog of my confusion gives way, slowly, to clarity of thought,” adding, after a pause, “I only wish that part about ‘clarity of thought’ were true.”

He is a man who, for sixty years, has struggled to determine how well our institutions and social systems serve the people they were designed to help, be they people with mental retardation, children in our beleaguered public schools, graduate students in psychology, or teachers and professors at all levels. For sixty years, he has agonized about why our institutions and social systems so rarely succeed in achieving the visions of those who created them, despite the sincere and hardworking efforts of people of good will.

He is a man who, over a half century of thinking, writing, and teaching, has worked to bring together disciplines, often segregated within academic circles, that he believes deeply influence one another: art and psychology, history and education, politics and schools, communities and universities, performing arts and teaching. For all this time, he has relentlessly challenged our conventional thinking about how systems evolve, why much-desired and often well-funded changes fail to bear fruit, and why our schools seem so resistant to adopting even those reforms whose validity has long been proven.

This walking contradiction is Seymour Sarason, and far too few of those who are engaged in education, psychology, and human services—particularly teachers and students of education—know much about him, despite the more than three dozen books that he has published over the life of his career, before and since his retirement in 1989 as professor of clinical psychology at Yale University.

A Sculptor of Ideas

I have known Seymour Sarason as friend and mentor since 1995, and for me his greatness lies in yet another identity, as “a sculptor of ideas.” Some scholars and reformers gain renown because they propose major new directions in their fields and then organize coalitions of people and institutions to carry their ideas forward. One thinks of Theodore Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools, or Mortimer Adler’s Paideia Project, or E. D. Hirsch’s cultural literacy movement, or the Comer schools modeled on the research of James Comer. Others become known as exemplary practitioners whose writings extend from their own successful settings to attempt to broaden the impact of their discoveries. Deborah Meier comes to mind, as do Nancie Atwell and William Glasser, among many others.

There are also people who establish themselves primarily as social critics, such as John Holt, bell hooks, Alfie Kohn, and Jonathan Kozol, who are more renowned for their cogent criticism than for the clarity of their reform proposals. Still others are celebrated for the relevance of their research, conducted in new settings or presented in ways that challenge conventional assumptions. Jeannie Oakes's work on tracking, Lisa Delpit's work on African American and other minority languages and cultures, and Mike Rose's interviews of working-class students are wonderful examples.

Seymour Sarason's writing shares certain characteristics with all of these distinguished writers. But his most important contributions to education are the ideas, notions, and concepts he has articulated that, over the course of six decades, have helped shape the thinking of many of these scholars, reformers, and philosophers of education. His ideas have been influential far beyond the breadth of his readership among educational practitioners and teachers-to-be. A number of his books—such as *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* and *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform* have sold very well, and most of his education titles are still in print. But partly because his thoughts have been spread over more than twenty-five books on educational themes, his words reach only a small percentage of the audience that he deserves. The present volume is an attempt to close this gap.

What are those ideas and concepts I claim are so vital? At risk of oversimplifying them, I will summarize a dozen of them here.

1. *Every school has a culture that manifestly defines how people within it operate.* A school is not just a building containing classrooms, teachers, and students, all of whom operate according to state and local district policies. It also has, and *is*, a “culture,” and, as such, it affects people in ways that they acknowledge as well as ways that are hidden from their consciousness. As examples, consider how rare it is in most schools for teachers to get together, on their own initiative, to talk about promising new ideas for improving instruction, or how rarely students volunteer questions about the meaning of what they are learning, or how new teachers are often left on their own to “sink or swim.” Only when we acknowledge this culture and ask ourselves how well, or how poorly, it reflects our values and goals for diverse learners of all ages can we take charge of our lives as teachers, parents, or students.

2. *The “regularities” of that culture—patterns, rules, and procedures that are mostly unseen and assumed—tend to undermine the basic purposes of educating our youth.* These regularities are what might be called “ways of doing business in school.” They are rarely questioned, but to an alien observer (in Sarason's favorite image, “the Man from Mars”), they seem curious, irrational, and counterproductive of the announced mission of schools. Among such regularities are the absence of most parents from active participation with the teacher in guiding their child's learning, and the fact that the school building bustles with activity for six hours a day, five days a week, and then is largely abandoned for any academic purpose. These regularities are not immutable “laws of nature,” nor are they the result of careful assessment of the efficacies of prac-

tice. They persist because they go unexamined and unchallenged (“But we’ve always done it that way!”). Only when we uncover such regularities can we decide whether they serve our purposes as educators.

3. *The overarching purpose of school ought to be that children should want to keep learning more about themselves, others, and the world, yet that purpose is mostly ignored.* Why should kids go to school? To learn the basics as they prepare for a career? So that we can pass our cultural heritage to another generation? So that we can inoculate them with bits of knowledge—dates, formulas, vocabulary lists—that we deem to be “basic”? Is that it? Is that enough? Or do we want them to become better learners, more confident, more capable, more curious? Is there any other goal that even comes close in importance to having students increase their desire to learn more about themselves, others, and the world? If not, why is this goal so rarely articulated and even more rarely assessed to see if, in fact, students leave our schools at least as interested in learning as when they entered?

4. *The educational “system” has an oppressive impact, and when that system continues unseen and unacknowledged, progress is stifled.* The search for culprits—bad teachers, bad students, bad parents, bad schools—who are supposedly responsible for failures in education is a popular, politically sanctioned activity. But the real culprit is the system itself, a system nobody designed, nobody champions, nobody in their right mind would duplicate, and almost nobody challenges. The system is so pervasive that it seems invisible to those who work within it. For example, at every level of schooling people tend to distrust and resent those (e.g., administrators) who wield more power than they, even as they are likely to show disdain or disrespect toward those (e.g., students) who have less power. Ignorance of “the system” perpetuates its worst attributes.

5. *The system, as it currently functions, is intractable, not easily reformed, and reform efforts that ignore systemic regularities and inherent obstacles will predictably fail.* The most significant feature of the educational system is its propensity to perpetuate itself, to just roll along in the face of considerable research illuminating its inefficiencies and failures. Reform efforts that do not acknowledge and address the undesirable features of the system itself are doomed to failure, because change gets stymied or sabotaged by the very dysfunctional aspects one is attempting to alter. For example, it is common in schools for changes to be handed down from on high—new rules, new tests, new priorities—and yet this way of initiating change almost always leads to resentment, apathy, subversion, and failure. Such failures only get compounded when a new reform effort repeats old mistakes.

6. *More specifically, reforms that do not change the power relationships between and among people in schools are fated to suffer paralyzing inertia, if not direct opposition.* Power is unjustly and inequitably distributed in schools and school systems, such that each group feels victimized by those with seemingly more power. We have to address these inequities and imbalances head-on, to ask ourselves why we behave as we do toward those above and below us in the hierarchy of power and how we can change those

relationships so that they reflect our democratic values and promote shared decision making.

7. *Sustained and productive contexts of learning cannot exist for students if they do not simultaneously exist for teachers.* Everyone within a school needs to work together to create an environment in which learners feel motivated and supported as they build on what they know and seek to learn more. But unless teachers also feel that they, too, are part of a high quality and respectful learning environment—that they are learning in a sustained and productive way—we cannot expect more than a few of such teachers to create that environment for their students.

8. *Applying labels to people, especially children, based on pseudo-scientific presumptions about their intelligence, their disabilities, or their academic potential is futile and unjust.* Since the thirties, with the introduction of IQ tests, and continuing with increasing fervor today, millions of children have had their academic careers misshaped by being tested and put into categories that often have had little to do with their real potential as learners. Even the humanizing promise of legislation for the handicapped, such as P. L. 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, has been undermined by the tendency of schools and school districts to “code” and label students.

9. *The democratic principle, while celebrated in America, is undermined or ignored in our schools and school systems.* This nation was founded on the revolutionary principle that those who will be affected by a decision have a right to be included in helping to shape that decision—except, evidently, in schools, where the exclusion of parents, students, and teachers from responsible roles in decision making continues unabated. Sarason is that most annoying of patriots. An unabashed champion of American constitutional values, he insists that we live up to them.

10. *Parents are vital partners, teachers are qualified leaders, and both (acting together) are potential governors of schools.* It is easy to proclaim the value of parent participation or involvement. But such advocacy is meaningless when parents are sidelined by school traditions that trivialize roles allotted to parents. Parents, along with teachers, deserve a much greater role—even if that means eliminating school boards and empowering parents and teachers to run the schools.

11. *U.S. presidents (with the exception of Jefferson) have failed to understand the systemic features of our education system.* The pathetic tendency of our highest political leaders to view schools as merely collections of classrooms, each made up of one teacher and a bunch of kids, is inexcusable. This failure is compounded every time a new president sets forth another list of a dozen goals, a “model program,” or a battery of high-stakes tests to be foisted on teachers and kids. If the same haphazard strategy had been applied to international affairs, the United States would have lost every war it has fought.

12. *American psychology has been reluctant to address, or has disdained to examine, critical issues in schools.* How can the very discipline that was pioneered, in this

country, by William James and John Dewey—both of whom were fascinated by the nature of learning—so neglect the plight of learners in schools and out? Psychology needs to own, once again, its responsibility to public institutions, including schools, and regain its historical role as a contributor to the improvement of human institutions.

“The Culture of the School”—The Impact of a Notion

The influence of Sarason's ideas has been much more widespread than is generally known even within the education community (let alone the book-reading public). Many if not most of the leading progressive theoreticians and scholars in education credit Sarason with helping to shape their thinking about schools and society. Such people as Theodore Sizer, Linda Darling-Hammond, Michael Fullan, John Goodlad, Deborah Meier, Ernesto Cortes, and the late Al Shanker acclaim Sarason's ideas for playing a major role in the formation of their philosophical stances.

The one place most of us begin is Sarason's notion of the culture of the school. The school culture is so evident, so pervasive, yet so invisible. We know a school as a building, a group of classrooms, a bunch of students, a staff of teachers and administrators, a curriculum of studies, a library, a playground. But how is it also a “culture”? And why is it so important that the main features of that culture be identified, examined, challenged, and changed? If we continue to fail to see the school as a culture, Sarason argues, we will be continually disappointed by the inability of people in school to make those changes that are called for by research, public will, economic necessity, intellectual honesty, and democratic principles. We will fail to see the forest for the trees.

What became increasingly apparent to Sarason, especially during the sixties, was that certain problems involving obstacles to school improvement were recurring with maddening frequency. Whatever the setting, whatever the context, changes that were designed to improve the operation of educational institutions were being sidelined, sweet talked to death, ignored, or sabotaged.

It was from this stagnation that Sarason's most influential work, *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*, emerged in 1971. This book brought to the world of education the most cogent challenge to the status quo since the writings of John Dewey a good half century earlier. And, indeed, Sarason is recognized as one of Dewey's heirs in progressive education, as well as for sharing Dewey's fascination with the nature of human learning.

Other books followed, on educational and psychological themes, plus essays on social criticism and the arts. By the time he retired from Yale, in 1989, as professor emeritus, Sarason had published twenty-two books. Time to sit back, relax, and enjoy some leisure after a long career of hard work.

Maybe for some; not for Sarason. Writing, formerly a central academic interest, has become his dominant passion. Books have flowed from the yellow legal pads covered with pencil marks decipherable only by a loyal secretary, Lisa Pagliaro. Between his re-

retirement from Yale and the end of the twentieth century, Sarason published an additional fourteen books. When I proposed the idea of this anthology to him in 1999, following the publication of *Teaching as a Performing Art* in that year, Seymour Sarason believed (as did I) that he had said pretty much all he needed or wanted to say about education.

I should have known better. While I was preparing this book, he was writing four new ones, three of them on education and the fourth including essays on education. Several of these books should appear at about the same time this anthology does. Sarason swears he is finally finished with writing about education. I do not believe him.

“Take the Poison!”

Seymour Sarason, now in his mid-eighties, often ends our telephone conversations with a joke, usually on a Jewish theme. One of his favorites concerns a timid man, living in a hamlet in Eastern Europe, who goes to the village rabbi and, quaking with fear, tells the rabbi that he thinks his wife is planning to poison him. “Nonsense,” says the rabbi. “Why would she do a thing like that?” “I’m scared to death,” says the man. “You’ve got to help me.” “Well,” says the rabbi, “I will come to the house and talk with her, if you insist. And then you’ll see how foolish your fears are.”

The rabbi appears at the door of the one-room house and is welcomed in. Since the husband is still frightened and upset, the rabbi tells him to sit outside while he speaks with the wife. For the first half hour, the man hears murmured conversation from within. During the second half hour, he hears his wife’s voice complaining steadily, with only occasional pauses. Then comes another half hour in which his wife screams and yells almost constantly. At this point, the rabbi emerges from the house, his eyes bloodshot, his prayer shawl in disarray. As he heads down the path to the village, he turns to the husband sitting there and, shaking his head, advises, “Take the poison!”

This joke offers an ironic glimpse of Seymour Sarason’s own approach to life. An exuberantly cheerful and idealistic person, he often takes a dim view of the possibilities of significant improvement in those institutions to which he has devoted more than a half century of professional work and thought.

In one sense, Seymour Sarason has “taken the poison” —he has accepted the hand that life has dealt him, including polio at age fourteen (which cut short his boyhood dream of becoming a football player). In person, he plays down the impact of this disability as an obstacle, but there is little doubt that it has spurred his ambition to “do great things” intellectually.

Born into a working-class Jewish family, the son of a cutter of children’s clothing (which, as he comments in his 1988 autobiography, was considered a “low status” job among his father’s Jewish contemporaries), Sarason had to overcome the influence of poverty in his family of origin. College, graduate school, a Ph.D., and a university career were far above the expectations of a person of his background. He was able to get

tuition aid to attend a commuter college only because his state government considered it a pathway to self-sufficiency for a victim of polio who might not otherwise find gainful employment.

Something happened to him as a young college student. First, he got politics—the politics of Marxism, a very attractive alternative for intellectuals growing up during the Great Depression. Then, he got psychology—an abiding interest in how the mind works and why people act the way they do. He abandoned the Marxism, as history showed him how similar Stalinism and fascism became in practice. He held onto the psychology. But the field of American psychology in the thirties and forties was fundamentally different from that of the post-World War II era. Freud was virtually ignored. Psychology, as a clinical approach to healing emotional disorders in people, was an uncertain and under-recognized discipline in higher education. Studying rats in cages and rats in mazes was “where it was at.” Being accepted into the graduate program in psychology at Clark University was another unexpected achievement for Sarason.

Receiving his Ph.D. in psychology in 1942, Sarason found the job market all but closed. As he commented, “I was the only one of three graduating students at Clark University in 1941–42 who never received a reply from the colleges to which I had applied for a position. I attributed that to the fact that I did not conceal that I was Jewish.” The only position available to him was as a resident psychological “tester” at the “state-of-the-art” Southbury Training School, in rural Connecticut, for people with severe mental retardation. So, that is where Sarason headed with his wife, Esther (also a psychology graduate of Clark University, and his lifelong partner until her death in an auto accident in 1993). The Southbury experience changed his life and deeply affected his growth in understanding about the nature of human institutions.

After three years at Southbury, Sarason was invited to apply to Yale University for a position in clinical psychology. He comments, “If anyone had told me when I came to Southbury in 1942 that I would be at Yale in 1945, my diagnosis and prognosis of their mental condition would have been gloomy indeed.” But thanks in part to his growing list of academic publications, he won the position, the first acknowledged Jew in his department.

While teaching graduate students in psychology, Sarason reached out to embrace the challenge of public education—at the very time that Yale was getting rid of its graduate program in education! He focused his critical attention in such areas as student test anxiety, teacher preparation, education for the handicapped, parent empowerment, and urban schools—areas that were, and are, generally avoided by American psychologists.

And once his research into public education produced the “bitter pill” of the system’s intractability to significant reform and change, Sarason accepted that poison, too, even though it meant his being unable to share the optimism of school reformers of the sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties, who thought that their new approach might be “the answer” to the system’s failure to educate all children.

Sarason’s response to all of this poison, however, has been anything but resignation. He has continued to write, to illuminate the nature of the obstacles and dilemmas, to challenge himself with even tougher questions than he poses to others. He has dared

school superintendents, college deans, business leaders, and U.S. presidents to open their eyes to systemic realities rather than hide behind slogans or pieties or simplistic solutions. In doing so, Seymour Sarason has thus far shared the fate of Priam's daughter Cassandra, who was endowed with power to predict the future but cursed by Apollo such that nobody would believe her predictions, however accurate.

It is often said of visionary people, of men and women who are passionately devoted to principles of equality, of democracy, of social justice, that, faced with formidable and overwhelming obstacles to their ideals by the forces of repression, they "would rather light one candle than curse the darkness." Seymour Sarason has, in his sixty years of teaching and writing, managed to light many a candle. But it is the uncompromising nature of his intellect, his refusal to soft-pedal the truth of systems and their cultures, that Sarason has maintained his right, also, to curse the darkness.

It is that quality, that skeptical vision, that makes Seymour Sarason indispensable to those of us who wish to bring light to our work with children and with the systems that attempt to educate them.

Robert L. Fried
Boston, 2002

CHAPTER I

Powerlessness Unanticipated

In this first selection, Seymour Sarason reminds us that teachers-to-be need more than a positive attitude toward kids and the requisite course work to prepare themselves for a career in education. He contends that those who enter teaching must have “a better comprehension of what life as a teacher too frequently is” and notes that “the conditions for a productive, satisfying career require . . . a social-intellectual-professional atmosphere” in which teachers can develop as professionals with real knowledge of the problems and promises of that profession. He finds that “those who choose teaching as a career are inadequately sensitized to the problems they will confront and what *they* can and *should* do about them.”

Question for Seymour Sarason

If you were teaching an “Introduction to Education” course for students contemplating teaching as a career, how would you begin the process of sensitizing them to the problems that lie ahead?

Sarason’s Response

At the end of the first class I would ask them to write a five-page paper on their experience of their school years. The paper would address, for example, these questions: “How often were you stimulated or bored?” “How many teachers turned you on?” “What is the most important thing you learned about yourself as a person and a learner?” “How well do you think your teachers knew you?” I would devote two to three sessions to a discussion of these “memory” papers.

In my book *The Case for Change* I have a chapter on an elective, year-long course on the culture of the school. I discuss the experiences they would be provided with, for example, attending board of education meetings and school faculty meetings, following

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the superintendent around for at least two days (also the principal, social worker, etc.). No one has taken me up on that suggestion.

Today, I would make something like that course *required* of anyone who seeks to become a teacher. The beginning teacher is scandalously ignorant of the culture of the school. I regard that chapter as containing one of the most constructive suggestions I have ever made.

More about the preparation of teachers may be found in:

Teaching as a Performing Art (1999)

How Schools Might Be Governed and Why (1997)

School Change: The Personal Development of a Point of View (1995)

The Case for Change: Rethinking the Preparation of Educators (1992)

The Preparation of Teachers: An Unstudied Problem in Education (1962)

. . . I resisted writing this book for fear that what I would say would be perceived as having an effect contrary to my intention, which is to portray to those considering a career in teaching a picture containing exciting opportunities to understand themselves, students, and our society. The source of my resistance was that those opportunities would be believable only if those contemplating a career in teaching knew the nature of the challenges they would confront. I long ago learned that too many people chose such a career abysmally unsophisticated about what they would be up against staying intellectually and professionally alive. Despite such a lack, some teachers had the courage and motivation to continue growing, learning, and changing. Too many teachers did not, and in saying that I intend no criticism whatsoever. The conditions for a productive, satisfying career require more than personal characteristics; they also require a social-intellectual-professional atmosphere in which those characteristics stand a chance to be expressed. What I found impressive were those instances where that atmosphere existed minimally or not at all but where individual teachers successfully sought to change that atmosphere.

It took me too many years finally to “hear” what almost all teachers were telling me: “I wish I had been made more knowledgeable about and sensitive to the realities of teaching real kids in a real school. If I knew when I started a fraction of what I know now, I might or might not have chosen a career in teaching, but I would have reacted to the realities in a better way.” One teacher articulated well something that for me had the clear, loud ring of truth: “It took me at least five years to overcome the tendency to regard myself as powerless to do anything to make my school an alive place. In my preparatory program, my instructors and supervisors—who were well-intentioned, sincere people—conveyed the impression that my major, even sole responsibility was to the students in my classroom. What was happening in the rest of the school was important *but none of my business* [her emphasis]. That, of course, was not true. When I had that insight, my whole outlook changed, and so did my role in the school. I helped change that school. I became a more happy teacher *and person* [her emphasis]. If I didn’t feel all-powerful, I certainly didn’t wallow in feelings of powerlessness. It wasn’t easy, but it

has paid off.” That was said to me twenty-five years ago, long before the issue of the role of teachers in educational decision making gained currency. If it has gained currency, albeit far more on the level of rhetoric than in practice, the fact remains that today those who choose teaching as a career are inadequately sensitized to the problems they will confront and what *they* can and *should* do about them. That is a central theme in this book. It is a theme, a belief, that literally forced me to write this book. “Salvation” has its internal and external sources and conditions.

If I believe anything, it is that unless and until those who enter teaching have a better comprehension of what life as a teacher too frequently is, *and what it should and can be*, improving our schools is a doomed affair. Yes, other things have to happen, other changes have to be made. But unless teachers are better prepared to play a more active, even militant role in such changes, improvement will be minuscule. It is that belief that permits me to emphasize . . . that those who today choose teaching as a career are doing so at a time when, individually and as a group, they can make a difference. No career other than teaching allows one as much possibility of meeting and coping with a threefold challenge: better understanding of oneself, others (students, parents), *and the society in which we live*. This is not an easy challenge. It is not for the fainthearted or those who view *the* teacher in *a* classroom as a desirable (or possible) monastic existence. It is a challenge that when understood and realistically confronted guarantees excitement, frustration, and personal-intellectual-professional growth.

What I say in this book to those contemplating a career in teaching can be put this way: “You may perceive what I say as coming from a pessimist who says the bottle is half-empty. I hope you will see it as coming from someone who sees the bottle is half-full and believes that you can increase its contents.” . . .

. . . If in the past I have been critical of what and how teachers teach their students, I am delighted to be able to say that teachers have taught me a great deal about teaching, teachers, and schools. I must single out two teachers, now my friends, who “instructed” me well. One is Ed Meyer, who at great personal cost, but not at the expense of dearly held values and intellectual integrity, has been a constructive and persistent critic of the preparation of teachers. The other is Robert Echter, who helped me understand how keenly teachers feel the lack of collegiality in their schools, a sense of community they passionately desire but were not helped to think about or to assume the obligation to achieve. . . .

. . . We are all familiar with the quip that the two things we can count on in our lives are death and taxes. There is a third thing: In our past, present, and future, something we thought was “right” was or will be wrong. That is as true for me as for the reader. I say that as a way of indicating that this book reflects an agonizing review of what I have learned from my experiences, mistakes, and successes. In one or another way I have been connected with schools for almost fifty years, either as a clinical psychologist, a researcher in schools, a consultant, or an active participant in teacher training programs. And those have been years during which the society generally and schools in particular have undergone dramatic change, although one should never confuse change with progress. It was hard, I would say impossible, for anyone living through those decades

to continue to think in accustomed ways. If it was true in those decades, it is still true today.

The immediate stimulus for this book is my bedrock belief that nothing will desirably change in our schools until those who enter teaching have a more realistic grasp of what life in a school is, can, and should be. It took me years to realize that those who were choosing teaching as a career did so more on the basis of fantasy than on reality-based expectations. That is understandable. After all, a person choosing a career in teaching is, relatively speaking, young, inexperienced, idealistic, unformed, and uninformed. There is truth to that, but I have had to conclude that it is a very partial truth, which obscures what can be with what is. No one can know all that one should know about choosing a particular career, but that is no excuse for not trying to help that person become aware, to some degree at least, of the problems one will predictably encounter in that career. And when I say “help,” I mean not only providing information but alerting the person to a most fateful question: Is there a match between the obligations, responsibilities, and problems inherent in that career and the individual’s personal style, needs, and goals? That is a question many professionals failed to struggle with at the point of making a career decision, with the consequence that they have some regret about the choice they made. That is as true for teachers as it is for lawyers, physicians, engineers, and businesspeople.

We are living at a time when there are scads of proposals to improve our schools. . . . However widely and wildly these proposals differ, they rest on the assumption that those who enter teaching have a working grasp of what it means to live life in a school. On the basis of hundreds (perhaps thousands) of conversations and interactions with teachers, I can assure the reader that that assumption is wholly or in large measure invalid. This is not to say that most of these teachers regretted their choice of career, although some did, but rather that they wished that they had made the choice with more scrutiny, that someone had alerted them to what they later came to see as predictable problems a teacher will encounter. As one teacher said to me, “I do not regret having chosen teaching, but I do regret that I made the choice on grounds that guaranteed I would have a lot of personal and professional problems, not about my classroom but about my place in the school and school system.” One teacher summed up what scores of teachers told me: “Before I became a teacher, I imagined that I would be part of a school family, that I would be part of an intimate, stimulating group of friends who shared experiences and had common goals. It hasn’t worked out that way, but at least I know from teachers in other schools that I should not blame myself.” Still another teacher, relatively new to teaching, articulated what I frequently heard from others: “When I decided to go into teaching, no one told me that my self-respect would force me to be assertive, even confronting about how decisions affecting me were made. Fortunately, I am no shrinking violet but, frankly, I didn’t expect to have to be as forthright as I have become.”

If what these teachers said does not paint the rosier of pictures, the fact is that there are schools, by no means numerous, in which teachers feel worthy, respected, consulted, a sense of personal-intellectual collegiality, the sense that they belong. And some of

these schools are what are termed “ghetto” schools, where the appearance of physical decay, inadequate resources, and a slumlike surrounding masks the reality of a devoted, closely knit, energy-demanding, creative group of educators who would not want to be elsewhere. What is noteworthy about these schools is they are what they are in large part because teachers exercised initiative and leadership about matters beyond their classrooms. So when I say that little of the goals of reform efforts will be realized unless and until teachers are better prepared to understand, deal with, and change the quality of personal and intellectual life in schools, I am saying that those who contemplate a career in teaching have to examine who and what they are and want to become. Not everyone seeking a career in medicine or law or psychology has the personal and temperamental characteristics such a career requires, both practically and ideally. It is no different for those seeking to enter the profession of teaching.

It is a truism to say that each of us is literally a unique person. It is also a truism to say that each profession has its unique aspects: for example, where and how that profession is practiced, the responsibilities and obligations of such a professional, the demands on life-style such a profession makes, and the kinds of personal and intellectual problems that will predictably be encountered over a professional lifetime. If you conclude that teaching is not for you, that is no basis for self-criticism. Teaching is not for everyone. If you conclude that teaching is for you, it should be on the basis that *you* know who and what you are, the ways in which you will be challenged, and that you are prepared to be other than a silent, passive participant in the socially fateful and crucial effort to improve our schools; that is, the particular school or schools in which you work. It is unfair and unrealistic to expect teachers to change the society. It is not unfair or unrealistic to expect teachers to change, in part if not wholly, the conditions in which they and their students experience personal and intellectual growth. Teachers have brought about such changes. If the number of instances is smaller than we like, let us not gloss over the fact that some groups of teachers successfully departed from tradition and the results have been both exciting and gratifying, despite all sorts of frustration and uphill climbs. These teachers were truly not shrinking violets. They were not content to live their professional lives in an encapsulated classroom in an encapsulated school.

I said that the immediate stimulus for this book is my belief that little or nothing will desirably change in our schools unless or until those who enter teaching have a more realistic grasp of what life in a school is, can, and should be. In discussing that belief, I have also answered the question about how I, who have never taught in a public school, can justify writing a book for those thinking about teaching as a career. The answer is simple: What I say in this book is what teachers have told me. I do not want to give the impression that I met with teachers, I asked questions, and out came answers. It was not as simple as that. What I learned from teachers—and in this respect, they were my teachers—I got after I had spent time in their classroom and school, after they perceived me as someone interested in how they thought and felt as teachers, after they came to believe me when I said that teaching is (that is, can be) a wondrous combination of intellectual challenge, interpersonal sensitivity, superhuman patience, creativity, a healthy

degree of frustration tolerance, and more. And some of these teachers had the courage and candor to say that they fell short of the mark.

There is one pervasive theme in this book that was rarely verbalized by teachers and represents a conclusion to which I was forced. Simply put, it is that teachers vastly underestimate their power to change things. Teachers tend to see themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy of power in educational decision making. That is the way things are, although that is slowly changing. And yet what teachers were telling me *implied* that unless their sense of powerlessness changed, the effort to reform schools would be another instance of “the more things change, the more they remain the same.” More than that, their basic stance was that alterations in their relationship to educational decision making would come from those higher in the hierarchy of power. That will not happen, in my opinion, except infrequently and (probably) begrudgingly. It will come primarily from teachers exercising initiative, leadership, and courage. That is why I regard who will choose teaching as a career to be so crucial in determining what will happen to our schools in the long- and short-term future. . . .