

# Life of an American Teacher

By Alice Latta

**I**F YOU could meet the primary teachers of the United States, you would find that a tremendous majority of them are women. They are women of all ages from young girls to white-haired grandmothers. Some are married; some are single. Varied as they are in many ways, they share a serene, happy, tranquil expression — visible evidence of the patience, sympathy, understanding, and loving-kindness which they employ in their teaching.

To understand their problems, it is necessary to understand some of the conditions which affect all American teachers. First, each teacher is subject to one of forty-nine codes of school law — that of one of the forty-eight states or the District of Columbia. He is also subject to the rules and regulations of the elected school board in the local district in which he teaches. The present trend is to combine the local school districts into larger units. Just recently, one of our sparsely populated states combined over 1100 school districts into something over a hundred. Decentralization of school control encourages experimentation but makes it difficult to describe the life of a typical teacher.

Second, distinctions in salary and prestige between elementary and secondary teachers are rapidly disappearing. In their preparations, both share the same general education and educational philosophy; they differ in the courses they take to prepare them for the subjects they teach, and in the special techniques of teaching. Also, many states are adopting a "single" salary schedule which makes no distinction in pay between men and women, or primary and secondary teachers. These schedules are based upon the amount of education, and the number of years of successful teaching experience a teacher has.

Another reason for a lack of distinction among teachers arises from the fact that the overwhelming majority of those who join any professional organization join their state education associations, and the National Education Association. Membership in both is voluntary and rapidly increasing because of the many services they provide. Teachers from the kindergarten to the professor in the university, administrators, college presidents — all work in cooperation within the N.E.A. to solve the problems of American

education and, in the process, inevitably develop a mutual respect.

Third, teachers and citizens are partners in a daring experiment — namely, the attempt to educate all American children to the extent that they are capable of receiving benefit. This is practical recognition of the fact that our most valuable natural resource is our children. It is agreed that the quality of work done by the primary teachers may well determine whether this challenging experiment will succeed — or fail.

An increasing number of states require a primary teacher to have four years of college education, including a basic general education of the liberal-arts type, "subject-matter" courses, and courses in the methods of teaching. The latter group usually includes psychology, child growth and development, methods of teaching, and some practice teaching under supervision. A course in the school laws of that state is usually required. Absurd differences in certification requirements among the states sometimes make it difficult for a teacher educated in one state to teach in another.

Two types of problems confront the primary teacher: those which affect all public school teachers, and those peculiar to him. Rapid and continuing increases in the school-age population have resulted in teacher shortages and overcrowded classrooms. Bills introduced in Congress to give financial aid to the states for teachers' salaries and school buildings have been defeated by those who wanted economy or to get aid for their special interests. Inadequate finance for schools not only affects teachers' salaries and school building programs, but it also cripples the libraries and cuts supplies and teaching aids.

General problems of retirement, tenure, and sick leave are not solved, although in many states much progress has been made. Also, within a particular school system, it is still often difficult for teachers and administrators to talk freely about the problems of deepest concern to them. Teachers are fearful that the employment of large numbers of unqualified persons as teachers on an emergency basis will lower the standards and prestige of their profession. They are making strenuous efforts to enlist more young

people in the profession and to improve the qualifications of those already employed.

One of the most acute problems of the primary teacher is the lack of a few minutes to himself during the school day. From the time the first school bus arrives in the morning until the last bus leaves at night, playground duty and lunch duty, in addition to his teaching duties, give him no time of his own. He is legally responsible if an accident happens during any minute he is not with his students.

The primary teacher starts his school day early. He must be there before the first bus arrives if he is to have time to put material on the blackboard. When the students arrive, he assists with games on the playground, encourages the timid and restrains the actions of the over-aggressive, and provides Band-aids for minor hurts.

When the classes assemble, he probably opens school with the flag salute and pledge of allegiance. He may read a brief quotation which points a moral lesson. The language arts — reading, writing, spelling, speaking, and listening — constitute the core of the curriculum in the primary grades. The more progressive schools have each grade divided into a number of groups of students who are reading at about the same level of difficulty. In some schools, there is a **primary department** instead of three grade divisions. In that case, all the students in the first three grades may be grouped in as many as fifteen different reading groups with the remainder of their subjects grouped accordingly. There is no uniform schedule. Time is allotted for a variety of subjects and activities with other periods for active play and for rest.

The teacher provides the children with vivid experiences to enrich their background. The children then talk about it, write their own stories about it, read them to the class, and then read more about it in their books. They use a variety of techniques to learn new words. Since some children have a very narrow range of experience, the teacher usually arranges many field trips for which the school buses are used.

The students with their teacher visit all sorts of businesses, industries, the fire station, police headquarters, post office, stores, airport, zoo, museums, libraries, and gardens. They may raise plants and animals in the school room. They learn folk dances, to speak over a microphone, to make puppets and give plays, and plan and give programs. They often use audio-visual aids such as phonographs, movies, radios, and TV. Their teacher tells stories to an enthralled audience, and they in turn tell stories of their own.

The students learn some mathematics, stories of the early history of their community, and some rudiments of the social and natural sciences. They model clay and papier-mache, paint, sing songs, and play in rhythm bands. They learn traffic safety rules and some of the basic rules of health. A few schools are experimenting with the teaching of a foreign language in the primary grades. The community and the child's own experiences are centers from which he reaches out for new knowledge to add to what he has. A corollary is that the teacher must find "where he is and help him to go on from there."

The busy day, enlivened by the children's alert curiosity, trusting confidences, unfolding personalities, and growing self-control, comes to an end usually after 3:00 P.M. Grading the day's papers is a minor job. Planning the next day's activities in minute detail and collecting the necessary materials may take some hours. The teacher may have individual conferences with parents to discuss each pupil's problems and progress with emphasis upon how he gets along with others.

The teacher then shops for groceries, prepares dinner for his family, and often has to hurry to be ready to go to a meeting by 7:30 P.M. It may be an in-service class, a meeting of the Parent-Teachers Association or some other organization which serves the community, or a committee of the professional organization working on a problem of teacher welfare. He does have parts of Saturdays, Sundays, and summer vacations for his personal affairs, including some relaxation and meditation.

The teacher's standard of living is that of the middle class. He probably owns his own home, has a car, a radio, perhaps a TV set, and plans to send his children to college. His prestige, if he is a good teacher, has risen tremendously in the last five years with increased public interest in education.

A teacher usually becomes an integral part of his community if he is enthusiastic and competent in his job, and if he shows an interest in community affairs by being active in his church and in some of the service clubs. In addition, men hunt and fish, build a boat or their home, bowl or find companionship in some other hobby. The women may join study clubs, play bridge, interest themselves in politics, golf, or do some other activity which interest them. Only the teacher who is indifferent, or who frequently moves from one job to another, is likely to remain isolated in the community.

The primary teacher will not trade his job for any other. Why? He loves to help children to grow in knowledge and virtue, and he is proudly conscious of the fact that his job is the most important one in the nation.