

## Undercover Teacher

# College Courses Not Much Help In Difficult Class

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 at the school, JHS 210, to learn first-hand the experiences of a teacher there, the attitudes and aptitudes of the students, the day-by-day problems of classroom instruction. School authorities, fellow teachers and students knew nothing of his true identity. This is the third of a series of articles.

By **GEORGE N. ALLEN**,  
World-Telegram Staff Writer.

Copyright, 1954, by New York World-Telegram Corp.

The training in education which I was required to take for my New York City teaching license was of little practical value to me in classroom 404 of John Marshall Junior High School.

I taught two ninth grade adjustment classes—slow learners—and two eighth grade average classes. In all of them, I felt handicapped—because I didn't know how to teach or control them.

With the adjustment students, it was a struggle to hold their interest and give them effective lessons.

In some of my more frustrated moments, I recalled a favorite piece of jargon I heard many times at Teachers College, Columbia University, where I studied last summer in preparation for teaching.



George N. Allen

### For Unruly Pupils.

It was advice given to teaching candidates for dealing with unruly or reluctant pupils:

"... Find meaningful situations in which your pupils can express their felt needs."

This phrase seemed funny to me then, but it seems tragic to me now.

What, I asked myself, was a meaningful situation for an emotionally disturbed youngster who sat in his seat with a vacant expression, saying nothing, doing nothing? And what were the "felt needs," I wondered, of the more promising students of my classes. I simply didn't know.

### Three Courses.

I searched my mind and looked over the notes I had accumulated during the six-week summer session at Teachers College. I found nothing to help me handle the adjustment students and little of use in teaching the two normal classes.

The three education courses I studied were: History of

Continued on Page Two

# College Training of Little Help In Handling Difficult HS Class

(Continued From Page One)

Education, Psychology of Adolescence and Methods of Teaching English.

None of these courses answered the practical, pressing questions that faced me:

How much homework should I give?

Should I ever use homework as a punishment?

How much English could I teach in one period—one verb? Two? Five?

How did I make up lesson plans?

What were the proper ways to maintain classroom discipline?

There were questions I had in anticipation of teaching average classes. When I learned the day before school opened that I had been handed two classes of difficult students and slow learners, I was startled to learn that a new teacher with as little practical knowledge as I had would be thrust into such a situation. A whole set of questions needed immediate answers.

## New Questions.

What were the techniques for teaching slow learners?

How did I talk to them; how did I test them?

How did I discover their real abilities?

What kind of lessons was I supposed to give these pupils?

Lest there be any misunderstanding, even though I was a reporter, I was in John Marshall Junior High School, duly licensed to teach children, to teach them as well as I possibly could. And I felt that I'd been "short-changed" in my preparation for a job I wanted to do well.

The titles of the courses I studied at Teachers College sounded fine and reasonable. But when I went behind the titles I found an unreal attitude that dealt largely with theories that could be applied only in the ideal school where students were highly motivated and where teachers had small classes.

## Took Compromise.

I wanted to take a course in the principles and philosophy of education, but I had to take the History of Education course. I felt the former course would be more useful to a beginning teacher. But, no. There was a conflict in time between two courses. I had to compromise and take the history course.

The history course did not pretend to have any practical application in the classroom. It was a standard series of lectures, competently delivered, which crammed the students full of historical facts.

The course titled Psychology of Adolescence was frankly disappointing. I am sure other series students missed my view.

There were 163 students in the class including a school principal, several nuns, a nurse, many practicing teachers and would-be teachers like myself. The professor was charming, a friendly person

and an amusing speaker. But, as I discovered later, little rubbed off on me that I could use in the classroom at John Marshall.

Many lecture periods turned into "bull" sessions. Many of the lectures were exhortatory rather than informational. The professor's major point seemed to be that adults must understand themselves before they can understand children.

## No to Exam.

In the middle of the course the professor asked the class if it wanted an end-term exam. The students chorused a reasonable "No." The result was that as soon as the mid-term was over, many students did no further work.

I did little additional work myself and at the end of the course I received my mark. It was an A.

This professor had written a pamphlet on school discipline which was popular at Teachers College while I was there. I later saw a copy of that booklet on the living room table of one of the junior-high school principals who interviewed me for a job. "Nice theories," said the principal. "But, it's obvious that the author has never taught in a difficult school."

I didn't know then what he meant by difficult school. I discovered this later.

One of the popular educational devices at TC was the "movie."

On many days I saw two



Staff writer George N. Allen working at home with his wife, Anne, while taking education courses at Teachers College.

Photo by Palumbo.

## MONDAY: Wanted: Teachers!

Staff writer George N. Allen describes the procedure he followed in getting his job as a teacher.

motion picture films in my three courses. I like to go to the movies but I didn't go to Teachers College to go to the movies. I went there because New York City school authorities told me I needed courses in education before I could properly teach a class of pupils.

The movies were dull and repetitious. They took 40 minutes to an hour to make a point which a good instructor could make in 10 minutes.

My third course was Methods of Teaching English or as it was listed in the Teachers College manual, "Teaching of English in Secondary Schools: Communication Principles."

## Catalog Description:

The catalog added:

"School and classroom viewed as communication situations; study of principles of communication which illuminate processes of learning and teaching; particular attention to arrangements for

communication and to materials appropriate to the multiple tasks of the teacher of English."

I didn't understand what the description meant when I started the course and still don't know. I wanted some help in teaching English and the course seemed concerned with abstruse principles in the science of communication.

I learned something about adult communication. I learned nothing about communicating with the young stars. Whom I was soon to face in JHS 210.

I left Teachers College with three "A's" in the three courses.

As required by city school authorities, I had taken three courses in education that were necessary before I could teach in a city school. My marks placed me near the top of the class.

I was now ready to be teacher. Or was I?