The Inside Track: Getting Hired to Teach in a Canadian School

Barlow S. Patten (2nd ed.). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, 2000, 248, pp. ISBN 1-55077-114-0

Chapters.ca lists over 1900 books on "Careers." Few are directed specifically toward teaching which makes Barlow S. Patten's *The Inside Track: Getting Hired to Teach in a Canadian School* a valuable, if somewhat flawed, resource for those aspiring to teach in Canada.

Patten begins with the résumé, offering several ways to present a variety of work experiences. He probably uses too many examples and too much detail for a standard length résumé of one to two pages, but Patten argues here and on his website at www.thompsonbooks.com - which is worth a visit - that a résumé should be long enough to include all useful information. He advocates consistency in style, organization and accuracy in the writing of the résumé because these qualities demonstrate a professional approach that will get the applicant an interview and a job. He lists work experiences and responsibilities in reverse chronological order.

Richard Bolles (2001), in *What Color Is Your Parachute?*, prefers a focus on transferable skills, as does Barbara Bowes (1999) in *The Easy Resume Book: a Transferable Skills Approach*. She suggests that the applicant concentrate on the skills acquired rather than on where or how they were acquired. While the skills approach is more contemporary, the applicant should remember that Patten, a principal himself, believes school administrators tend to be cautious and could be wary of those who do not list experience in a logical progression. They might be trying to hide something.

As for the cover letter, Patten, in contrast to the profusion of examples for the résumé, provides only two, one each for the less experienced and more experienced teacher. While both samples highlight relevant experience, their style seems too informal, especially given the aforementioned conservative nature of school administrators.

More useful is the chapter on the interview. The quality of the sample questions is generally very good, although many are more appropriate to elementary school applicants. Some of the questions are of the "what would you do" variety whereas many interviewers today prefer the "what have you done" type. The arrangement of the questions, some under issue headings (e.g. curriculum, classroom management and dealing with parents) and others under grade division, allows applicants to easily select the most relevant. Patten provides some sound advice regarding the interview process. For example, since most people are uncomfortable conducting interviews, an applicant who is prepared and relaxed will relax the interviewers and make them more likely to hire the applicant. He points out that the final question in an interview will be a variation on "Is there anything else you would like to say". His advice: the applicant should be prepared to mention two or three key points the interview team will want to remember.

An unusual feature of this book is the 18 appendices that comprise 40% of the total text. While some of this information is useful (e.g. careers related to teaching), much of it could have been included in the text (e.g. occasional teacher information and the use of information technology in the application process), found elsewhere (e.g. issues related to citizenship, certification and teacher federations/unions), or eliminated (e.g. homework ideas for kindergarten students). As well, some of the information will be quickly dated (e.g. information regarding teacher contracts).

Is there a better use for this space? Probably. Job trends specialist, Ann Eby, writing in *The Toronto Star*, recommends résumé guides based on a workbook format. Patten might have created such a workbook within or at the end of the text so his readers could practise applying his advice on paper. He might have written a chapter on teaching for aspiring educators. A thoughtful analysis of the nature of the job would provide prospective teachers with some appreciation of the demands of the profession, and an opportunity to weigh those demands against their career expectations before making a commitment to teaching.

One of these demands is greater accountability. Patten implies this by making reference to the tried and true business cliché: "If we don't look after our customers, someone else will." Unfortunately, there is a deeper implication in these words: schools ought to be run like businesses. Do we want our students to be regarded as products of that mentality? Will teachers be able to do their best work in such an environment? Patten is clearly a dedicated educator. For him to use such a provocative statement and then let it go unchallenged is disappointing.

Patten also falls victim to two of an educator's worst enemies: jargon and verbosity. For example, in "How This Book Came To Be" at the start of the text, he writes"

During my M.A. studies, I was involved in investigating the totality of the staff selection process and how its stages and methods can be modified to increase the degree of its predictability of excellence in performance.(p.7)

He seems to mean that he studied how to make the hiring process work better. Further down the same page, he writes that his book "is designed to be a paraclete" and then provides a detailed definition. Why not use plain English in the first place?

In a sample letter to parents about reading (Appendix 17), Patten gets downright long-winded. He even admits it: "I suspect that I have achieved overkill on this...", yet he carries on, ignoring the possibility that many parents, often working, would appreciate more concise (and perhaps less condescending?) correspondence from their child's school, even if they are disposed to help their child read better. Furthermore, the letter appears to cast doubt on the value of information technology as a learning tool, contradicting the opinion he expressed earlier. In any case, it seems to have no direct relevance to the primary goal of the book, although it reflects the Jekyll and Hyde character of *The Inside Track*.

Patten obviously knows his subject. The information on résumé and interview preparation is solid and, while not central to the purpose of the book,

his chapters on using occasional (supply) teaching and volunteering as alternate routes to a full time teaching job are useful, particularly what he has to say about their limitations. Also worthwhile are the annotated "Further Readings" chapter and the often wise and witty marginal notes and quotes. On the other hand, the book requires some serious editing. It is unnecessarily long, sometimes pedantic and too often unfocused. For a harried and hurried job applicant, this could be a serious detriment to the book's value.

Despite these shortcomings, Patten deserves credit for doing a double service to the teacher hiring process in Canada. He has given potential (and experienced) teachers a tool to pursue their goal, and he has raised the standard of professionalism both for teacher applicants and for the people who hire them. Such a contribution can only serve to improve the quality of those who work with our children.

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