

The Teacher's Continuing Education

By Linda Koh

The village all declared how much he knew;
'Twas certain he could write, and cipher
too;
Lands he could measure, terms and tides
presage,
And even the story ran that he could gauge.
In arguing too, the parson owned his skill,
For e'en tho' vanquished, he could argue
still;
While words of learned length and
thundering sound,
Amazed the gazing rustics ranged around;
And still they gazed, and still the wonder
grew,
That one small head could carry all he
knew.¹

If the accumulated learnings of the village schoolmaster were a source of amazement to the rustics in Goldsmith's rather romantic poem, consider how much more astonished they would be at the

Linda Koh is Chairman, Education Department, Southeast Asia Union College of Seventh-day Adventists, Singapore.

demands made on the modern teacher. In the two centuries that have passed since this tribute to the teacher was written, the world has, for better or worse, become an immensely more complicated place in which to live. One can no longer impress others with such prosaic skills as the ability to write, cipher, measure, gauge, and argue.

The modern pedagogue, perhaps more than anyone else in this frenetic society, is expected to be aware of the technical progress, cultural change, and social movements we call progress. This is only half of the story, since these represent merely the demands made on the teacher's general knowledge. There is, in addition, the proliferation of information in the teacher's two fields of special-

ization—general education and the specific subjects taught. Keeping abreast of developments in these two fields alone is a staggering job, but when added to the demands on his or her general knowledge, it must seem to the bewildered teacher that it is gross injustice to expect "one small head" to carry all that he or she is expected to know.

But there is hope! The teacher can develop his or her background of knowledge and grow professionally on the job. The same "one small head" that created this problem can be used to solve it.

Courses, Seminars, and Workshops

To become a teacher is not only to commit yourself to your students; it is also to commit yourself

Picture
Removed

to being a continuing learner. Teachers are daily confronted with things they do not understand about children and knowledge and how the two interact. To remedy this lack, teachers can take courses related to their fields of teaching or work toward an advanced degree.

Many colleges and universities as well as professional organizations offer courses suitable for and interesting to teachers. These courses and degree programs not only allow teachers to gain a deeper understanding of their work but also make it possible for some teachers to train for other jobs in education, such as guidance counseling, administration, or college teaching.

Of course, the teacher's study should not be confined to professional problems alone. His or her interests may lead into such areas as physical fitness, gardening, politics, or creative arts.

Teachers can also attend seminars, workshops, or minicourses, which provide invaluable materials as well as practical suggestions and ideas that they can try out in their classrooms.

Group Study

Group study represents another path to continuing learning and growth for teachers. It frequently takes the form of committee work. When a problem arises in the school for which there is no apparent solution, a group of people take on themselves the task of exploring the topic with a view toward recommending an enlightened course of action. In recent years, teachers and administrators have begun inviting community residents to serve as resource persons in these study groups in order to receive input from outside the school. Typical issues addressed by such study groups include: alternatives to the present second-grade

reading program, an analysis of the unused educational resources in the community, or the potential benefits and cost of using paraprofessionals in upper grades.

These study groups usually consist of four to eight members who share similar concerns in solving a specific problem. The persons who identify the problem might first discuss the plan for a group study with the principal and later in a faculty meeting in order to recruit other interested members.

Once the principal recognizes the potential benefits, the participants get together to organize the group, appoint a chairperson, invite community resource experts, distribute specific topics for each member to research and study, and finally hold several meetings to explore possible solutions. The group completes its study by recommending a specific course of action to the principal or faculty.

Professional Journals/Magazines

A third avenue to growing professionally on the job comes through independent reading of current journals and magazines. Such periodicals provide up-to-date research and information on professional problems as well as innovations in the area of teaching. Reading a wide variety of such publications can help the teacher to be an informed learner. Since the supply of professional books and journals is increasing so rapidly, the teacher will be able to readily obtain reading materials at all times. In fact, the only problem may be deciding what to read!

Teaching Centers

Another fairly new and promising opportunity for continuing learning can be provided by a teacher center. Teacher centers have been established by American schools based on ideas formulated

in Australia, Japan, and especially Great Britain. It has been estimated that there are currently 4,000 teacher centers in the United States.

The U.S. Government has defined such centers as sites where teachers have the opportunity to "develop and produce curricula, utilize research findings, and provide training to improve the skills of teachers."²

Because a teacher center is a relatively new concept, it is difficult to define precisely. Basically, it can be described as a place where teachers can go to exchange ideas, talk about professional problems, and learn about new materials and teaching approaches. Such a center is usually developed for and by teachers in the same school district and is located off school grounds in a central spot. The teacher center contains many materials and tools for making inexpensive instructional materials.

Initially, several interested teachers may get together to organize such a center. To do so, they will need to scout for a place within easy access of most teachers (perhaps an unused room in a church building); solicit free materials such as magazines and journals, letter stencils, and audiovisual materials; and set up an informal, comfortable area with bean-bag chairs, throw cushions, and couches.

Teachers can meet at the center on a regular basis. During the several days a week when the center is open, they can drop by at their convenience, staying as long as necessary to accomplish their objectives or obtain the help they require.

At the center, discussion groups may be scheduled to help teachers share ideas. As they sit with fellow teachers and analyze the behavior

(To page 35)

Continuing Education

(Continued from page 21)

of a problem child, teachers can grow in understanding of all children. Discussions in which experienced teachers share some of their successful methods and ideas can

Separate
Articles
Removed

be especially helpful.

Another valuable activity at the center can be the sharing of new materials and teaching techniques. Teachers who have been away to seminars, conventions, or workshops may return with materials on the latest techniques and educational innovations to introduce to their colleagues. Facilities at the center make it possible to duplicate some of these materials for use in many classrooms.

At times, activity at the teacher center may involve discussion of research ideas and current issues in the field of teaching and child development. Experts in related fields can be invited to speak to the teachers gathered at the center.

Sometimes a more informal exchange of ideas and information between teachers can be beneficial, and the relaxed atmosphere of the teacher center fosters the sharing of concepts and techniques. But beyond this, teachers can see the center as a place to relax and have their commitment to teaching renewed, a place where they can receive affirmation from fellow teachers and thus help avoid the stresses that can lead to burnout.

Teacher centers should offer whatever seems most useful. A suggestion box, mounted in a prominent location, will encourage a supply of ideas for future seminars and other activities in which teachers would like to participate.

The teacher center holds great promise as an innovative way to improve teachers' skills and attitudes. The personnel in our church schools would benefit from organizing such centers for their own use.

In-service Programs

In-service programs sponsored by the school or district provide another avenue to continued growth and learning for teachers.

Such programs are often designed to address school- or district-wide problems or issues. For instance, if students are getting low math scores on standardized achievement tests, the district may choose to provide special in-service training for the faculty, or it might switch to a new mathematics program.

Such a change may require special training for the faculty and would thus become the focus of an intensive in-service program, during which college professors or experts in the field may be invited to conduct the training.

In-service training may take place weekly or monthly, either before or after school. In addition, special days can be set aside on which school is cancelled or the students are dismissed early so that teachers can participate in in-service activities.

In-service programs are often criticized because they are brief, infrequent, unspecific, usually designed by central administrators, and not very effective. However, there is growing agreement about the components of effective in-service training programs. Such programs share the following characteristics:

. . . 1) the training programs are targeted at needs defined by teachers and administrators, and the training agenda and specific problems are developed by teams of teachers; 2) in-service training is a continuous process that is integrated into the regular workday activities of the school; 3) the training is flexible and practical enough to permit teachers to adapt what they learn to their particular classrooms; 4) formal training is followed up by collegial exchange about the usefulness of what was taught; 5) supporting materials and technical assistance are available; and 6) the principal and teachers are committed to change.³

Having an opportunity to visit teachers in other systems can also generate new ideas. When teachers see how other educators deal with the problems that confront them, they obtain new insights into ways

that they can work more effectively. If a school does not provide for such visits, teachers can at least spend their planning period visiting other classes in the same school.

Other Ideas

Sabbatical leaves for study and travel constitute one of the latest types of in-service programs that have been adopted in many school systems. Provisions differ from one system to another; however, teachers who have taught a minimum number of years in a particular system may qualify for a sabbatical to participate in independent or research study, engage in leadership or professional internships, plan for educational travel, or become involved in some work experience such as helping revise curriculum for a specific subject area.

For teachers interested in planning sabbaticals, school policy handbooks should be helpful in listing the terms of eligibility, specific activities, and length of absence.

In addition to these formal in-service educational activities, teachers can continue to obtain in-service education by participating in professional association programs, staff and faculty meetings, departmental meetings, extracurricular projects, and committee leadership roles.

Overseas teaching and teacher exchanges provide another interesting way for teachers to expand their professional qualifications. Teachers may choose to teach in the overseas schools operated by the government of their countries, or in schools run by their church. These overseas teaching assignments not only contribute to the experience and education of the participating teachers, but are also in the national interest.

Regular teaching assignments are usually based on a term of two to three years, while a teacher exchange may involve a shorter period of time, such as a summer or one school year.

Teachers who seek to improve their skills through such activities may be interested in writing to the appropriate agencies. For additional information about SDA overseas teaching assignments, they can write to Mrs. Rowena Olson, Secretariat, General Conference of SDA, 6840 Eastern Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20012. Volunteer terms of one year, as well as longer appointments, are available.

In most countries, agencies dealing with recruiting teachers for the army or navy abroad can be an excellent source of contact. In the United States, teachers can write to the U.S. Department of Defense, Attention: Recruitment, 2461 Eisenhower Ave., Alexandria, VA 22331-1100 to apply for overseas teaching positions. Teacher-exchange programs can be arranged by writing to Mrs. Patricia Schaefer, E/AX, U.S. Information Agency, Room 248, 301 4th St. SW, Washington, D.C. 20547.

Undoubtedly, all such in-service programs not only satisfy the teacher personally but also help to make education more stimulating for his or her students.

Teaching well is continuing to learn and grow professionally on the job. Each teacher will grow in different ways, but an important ingredient of such growth must be humility, an appreciation that there are better answers than we have, the conviction that anyone we meet may contribute a word or fragment of an idea that will open our eyes to new possibilities. An essential facet of creatively improving teaching skills lies in the constant search for new ideas. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ Oliver Goldsmith, "The Deserted Village," 1770.

² P.L. 142-482, 1976. *Federal Register* 43 (January 11, 1978): 1762.

³ Susan J. Rosenholtz, "Political Myths About Education Reform: Lessons From Research on Teaching," *Phi Delta Kappan* 66:5 (January, 1985), 352.

Separate
Articles
Removed