

## **The Fate of the Beginning Teacher**

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The beginning teacher is potentially the greatest asset that a school acquires. The beginning teacher represents the future of the teaching personnel in the school and properly nurtured will ensure that quality instruction continues. However, this asset could be wasted if administration, at both the local and conference level, does not take the time and effort to care for the special needs of the beginning teacher. To use an analogy, this tender young plant could be crushed before having the chance to grow and blossom into a confident and effective master teacher. According to Stone (1987), a 1984 Wisconsin study revealed that 15% of new teachers leave the profession after the first year of teaching and fully 50% leave within five years. Administrators need to take note of this and take steps to ensure that the beginning teacher does not fail due to a lack of nurturing and support from administrators and veteran staff members.



### **Characteristics of the Beginning Teacher**

As human beings, every beginning teacher will not exhibit identical characteristics. However, research has uncovered certain characteristics that are common to most new teachers. Perhaps foremost, is the idealism and enthusiasm that the new teacher brings from the teacher training experience. Despite this enthusiasm, Winters (1989) states that the beginning teacher often fears that the mere admission of being a first-year teacher may cause rejection and feelings of inferiority. Stone (1987) proposes that new teachers are often afraid to ask for help because that would be a sign of weakness or incompetence.

Today's teachers are obviously much better trained than those of previous generations, but Stone (1987) maintains that it is often those who were at the top academically, who leave teaching first. The modern beginning teacher is filled with a large body of knowledge and has been successful in student teaching as a part of training, but this does not guarantee success in the classroom. A veteran teacher has a large store of experiences to draw on in times of need but the beginning teacher has, as Boynton, DiGeronimo, and Gustafson (1985) put it, "a nearly empty bag of experiences."

These feelings, fears, and lack of experiences often add up to one characteristic that is often exhibited in the beginning teacher - loneliness. The teacher who is suddenly transported from the safe confines of the university with all of its helpful professors and thrust into a classroom to stand alone as the autonomous authority, can suddenly feel very lonely indeed. It is incumbent upon administrators to recognize the special problems that the new teacher faces and attempt to meet the resulting needs.

### **Problems Faced by the Beginning Teacher**

An analysis of research studies by Veenman (1984) showed that there were twenty-four most frequently perceived problems for beginning teachers. The top 10 were: (1) classroom discipline, (2) motivating students, (3) dealing with individual differences, (4) assessing students' work, (5) relations with parents, (6) organization of classwork, (7) insufficient materials and supplies, (8) dealing with personal problems of individual students, (9) heavy teaching load, and (10) relations with colleagues.

The reported problems cover a variety of areas involving not only students, but also parents, fellow staff members, and administration. Gorton (1983) suggests that new teachers develop several questions during the first few months of the school year. They are as follows:

1. What exactly is my total assignment in this school?
2. Why don't I have any permanent classroom or office of my own?
3. Is everyone as busy during the day and exhausted at the end of the day as I am?
4. What do I do to motivate the kids to learn what I am teaching? And how do I evaluate and grade these kids?
5. What do I do about the kids who can't learn? How do I handle troublemakers in my classes?
6. How do I handle this angry parent who keeps calling me to complain about the way I am treating her child?
7. How does one get accepted in this school by the older teachers?
8. I am unsure. Do the students and other teachers really like me, accept me, and think I am a good teacher?

(p.175)

These problems and questions could overwhelm the beginning teacher if support and answers are not given. Obviously, a single orientation meeting at the beginning of the year would not be sufficient. The process of helping a new teacher develop should be continuous throughout that first critical year.

### **Needs of the Beginning Teacher**

Hetlinger (1986) maintains that the success or failure of a beginning teacher may hinge on the need to receive adequate orientation to both the school and the job. The problem is that principals are often under a lot of pressure at the beginning of the school year and neglect this important phase of the new teacher's experience.

Everyone is affected by stress. The beginning teacher will obviously feel extra stressed and how he or she reacts to that stress will mean the difference between success or failure. In a 1987 study, Calabrese found that a teacher needs a good communication link with the principal in order to be more likely to react positively to stress. In establishing this communication link, the teacher gets the chance to discuss problems and concerns while receiving immediate feedback.

Bullough (1987) stresses that the beginning teacher needs to talk about his or her work and receive feedback on what is being done. This need can be met by in-service meetings, dialogue with fellow staff members, and the principal. However, a study by Seyfarth and Nowinski (1987) revealed that teachers receive relatively little feedback about their performance from principals. As for this need being met through other means, it was found that most teachers preferred feedback from the principal. Feedback is essential because the majority of people have the inner drive to be good at what they do and without feedback it is difficult to evaluate what they are doing.

The need for evaluation is stressed by Laing (1986). He emphasizes the value of formative evaluations for the beginning teacher. The teacher needs to know that the evaluations are being done for the express purpose of being helpful. This will make it necessary to have pre-evaluation conferences, as well as post-evaluation conferences, with the emphasis being on positive feedback.

As far back as 1983, Kurtz identified eight specific needs of beginning teachers:

(1) an extra orientation session for them alone, (2) special in-services to be held periodically throughout the year dealing with topics specifically directed toward the new teachers, (3) pairing with a master teacher, (4) someone appointed to help the new teacher set up his or her classroom, (5) not allowing the beginning teacher to end up with courses or classes that nobody else wants, (6) don't overload the beginning teacher with extra duties, (7) have regular weekly contacts with the principal, and (8) the principal should regularly evaluate the orientation program and obtain feedback from the new teachers in order to assess its effectiveness.

Being aware of these needs and making an effort to satisfy each one, would greatly enhance the effectiveness of successfully inducting a beginning teacher into the total school program. Of course the burden rests upon the principal or superintendent to initiate and carry out an orientation program such as Kurtz suggests.

### **Implications for Seventh-day Adventist Education in Canada**

It is apparent that the beginning teacher has special characteristics, some of which are quite valuable and should not be lost with the passage of time. The beginning teacher also undergoes the stress of having to deal with an extensive list of problems and has certain needs that cannot be fulfilled from within self. It is incumbent upon the principal of the school to recognize the responsibility of nurturing the new teacher rather than allowing the situation to crush him or her. With careful planning and attention to detail, the principal can be invaluable to the beginning teacher. Making a definite effort to keep the lines of communication open and involving veteran staff members, the principal can play a large part in the successful completion of a teacher's first year.

All of the preceding suggestions could be successfully carried out in a larger school which has a qualified and capable full-time principal. However, the problem facing Seventh-day Adventist education in Canada is that the majority of schools in the system have three teachers or less. In those situations there is no full-time principal and sometimes the beginning teacher is even asked to function as the head teacher. What can be done for the beginning teachers who take their first assignment in one of these small schools? Here are a few suggestions for consideration:

1. Avoid placing a beginning teacher in a one-room school. If there is no alternative, the conference superintendent should visit the school at least once each month. The superintendent should plan to spend at least one full day with the teacher and allow time outside of the regular school hours for discussion and feedback.
2. Due to the necessity of having skilled superintendents in place, no conference should appoint a superintendent who is not qualified or holds the necessary credentials. Furthermore, the superintendent should have no other conference duties outside of education. The local conferences must take the education of Seventh-day Adventist young people seriously by hiring the necessary personnel. The extra funds that are required would be more than repaid through less teacher movement and the strengthening of the church through the education of its youth.
3. The superintendent should plan three or four in-service sessions each year for beginning teachers. All expenses should be paid, thus making attendance mandatory.
4. Involve veteran teachers in a mentoring program. Provide release time for veteran teachers from other schools to visit a beginning teacher in a small school to provide support, feedback, and ideas. In conjunction with this, have a veteran teacher help the beginner set up his or her classroom during the week before school starts. This can be supplemented throughout the year with regular contact by telephone or internet.
5. The superintendent should meet with the local school board and outline the special needs of the beginning teacher. During that session inform the board of what plans have been made for

dealing with those needs and solicit the support and cooperation of the board. There may be someone on the board or in the local church who would be capable of and interested in providing some help.

Christian education is important to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Canada. Serious study should be given to ascertaining how to improve current practices affecting the beginning teacher. By involving school boards, veteran teachers, and volunteers the whole system may be strengthened through nurturing the beginning teachers. Finances are limited but the Seventh-day Adventist education system continues to exist, despite its problems, because of dedicated and willing personnel. Many of the things that can be done to help the beginning teacher are a matter of making full use of the dedicated people currently working in the system. Give them a reason for being and offer frequent affirmation. Other suggestions are simply a matter of setting priorities and exercising good time management. Most importantly, it should be realized that money spent on properly inducting new teachers is money saved through developing and keeping quality personnel.

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