

MAKING TEACHERS MORE EFFECTIVE

Students need to go beyond the study of individual disciplines to develop an understanding of shared human experiences.

BY T. H. NKUNGULA

As we celebrate the Year of the Adventist Teacher, we are reminded that teaching as a profession “is the nicest work ever assumed by men and women,” since it deals with “youthful minds.”¹ However, it is a difficult task to perform effectively, for according to Ellen G. White, “there are very few [teachers] who realize the most essential wants of the mind and how to direct the developing intellect, the growing thoughts and feelings of youth.”²

Recent research seems to reinforce this statement by accusing most improvement efforts in education of taking traditional labels and adding more of the same:

- “more teacher-centered instruction,
- “more homework,
- “more standardization and restrictions of the curriculum,
- “more testing of students,
- “more alignment of lesson plans with test objectives,
- “more uniform lockstep retention policies,
- “more and tighter evaluation of teachers.”³

However, simply doing more of the same provides little insight into how the various subjects can serve larger, more comprehensive goals. “More of the same” also offers few clues to the reasons why certain programs do not

produce good results. In fact, it does not even suggest which strategies may be ineffective.

Teachers become so burdened by the “piling on” of extra duties that they often have little time to consider which strategies will produce the ends they seek. As a result, although they have adequate academic and professional preparation, they fail to help students understand how schoolwork relates to the society in which they live, or to the larger interdependent world they will inevitably confront.

Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, argues that students need to acquire adequate understanding and knowledge in order to read the morning paper and converse with others about important issues.

However, Boyer expresses an even deeper concern for students to go beyond the study of individual disciplines to develop an understanding of shared human experiences. He cites technology as an example, pointing out that an understanding of the complexities of this subject is crucial because technology will drastically affect the quality of our lives, as well as the future of our planet.

Boyer suggests that all young people need more creative work in science and technology. This includes students oriented toward liberal arts, the trades, business, computer program-

ming—even those who will drop out before obtaining a diploma. Each young person needs to be prepared to act responsibly as a concerned citizen when confronted with technological issues.

As we honor Adventist teachers in 1989, the Year of the Teacher, we must also make a commitment to offer each one the help he or she needs to prepare our children for academic, moral, and civic responsibilities within a changing world.

Complexities and Dilemmas in Teaching

Teaching is a complex profession with many dilemmas. Much of a teacher’s planning energy goes into trying to “predict and anticipate potential problems, to guess and estimate what students already know and how they might respond, and to forming plans and routines that are robust to the interpretations that assault most of the teachers most of the time.”⁴ Research indicates that the greatest proportion of a teacher’s interactive planning relates to students (between 39 and 50 percent) followed by instructional behavior and procedures, content materials, and learning objectives.⁵

A teacher’s interactive thoughts may be categorized as perceptions, interpretations, anticipations, and reflections.⁶ Unfortunately, many of

these processes tend toward perpetuation of the status quo. Generally speaking, teachers consider implementing major changes in instructional processes only when their teaching is going poorly.

Three studies examined the relationship between the interactive decision and student-on-task behavior or achievement.⁷ The researchers concluded that the interactive decision-making of effective teachers is characterized by rapid judgment; "chunking" many events and cues into a few categories, based on their importance; and willingness to change the course of classroom interaction when necessary. Shulman sums up by saying that effective teaching is a more complex activity than diagnosing illness.⁸

Helping Students Adjust to Their Environment

Mary Hatwood Futrell, outgoing president of the National Educational Association, emphasizes the acute need to better prepare young people to adapt and improvise successfully in a rapidly changing world. "We must help students to become mentally agile, emotionally resilient, and intellectually adventurous," she says.⁹

Judging from the facts given earlier in this article, the challenges posed by teaching are great and obstacles are everywhere. Accordingly, teachers cannot hope to prepare students for smooth adjustments in this world of perpetual flux "if they remain wedded

to static conceptions of effective pedagogy."¹⁰ Futrell points out that the students of today will shape their nation's civic mentality tomorrow. If teachers remain locked within an autocratic bureaucracy, they cannot hope to equip students for civic, professional, and religious responsibilities.

Teacher Preparation for Effectiveness

A professionally trained teacher needs continued opportunities to develop effective methods and techniques in order to create meaningful learning situations. Research on teacher development stresses that for teachers to be empowered, training and in-service programs must include process instruction strategies, decision-making skills, research analysis, application techniques, opportunities for personal reflection, intellectual interaction, and collegial coaching.

Professional literature also supports the concept of an ongoing staff development program that integrates research findings with effective process strategies. Not surprisingly, research on teacher effectiveness stresses the importance of advanced education, asserting that it has a substantial effect on the attitudes of those exposed to it. As we celebrate the Year of the Teacher, we are, through literature and research, reminded of the tremendous responsibilities of the church to help its teachers develop

and polish their professional skills.

Professional Skills in Teaching

As was pointed out earlier, many teachers fail to help their students meet their life needs. This suggests that to a certain extent poor teaching results from failure by teachers to see the totality or wholeness of the task of education. "We often concentrate on the head or the tail and wonder why our teaching is ineffective," Krause observed.¹¹

Research alludes to teaching as the creation of experiences for learners. The nature of these experiences depends on what we plan to accomplish, which in turn is related to the philosophy of education developed and refined by the school or organization.

Effective education begins with an "invitation" from the teacher for a student to enter into a learning experience. Next the pupil becomes actively involved in the learning endeavor in as many ways as the teacher can devise. The student explores, collects, discusses, listens, constructs, analyzes, and describes.

Such learning goes far beyond the level that is required for students to perform acceptably on standardized tests. The teacher becomes more effective as he or she is able to find ways to personalize the learning

Effective teaching is a more complex activity than diagnosing illness.

for each student. The students thus come to see the value of education to their personal lives and are influenced to seek additional information and insights. In this way each student becomes personally involved in his or her own education without the need for external urging from the teacher or anyone else. The new learning becomes meaningful to the student affectively, practically, aesthetically, as well as intellectually.

Teachers who concentrate on "teaching to the test" often produce students who lack curiosity and enthusiasm, who view learning as something to be endured, not as a lifetime adventure.

In this Year of the Teacher, we must combine our resources and develop tangible plans for teacher training that will help our teachers upgrade their skills. This will help them ensure that their classrooms are places where the excitement of learning is readily seen.

To accomplish this the school system must encourage and equip teachers to apply meaningful teaching techniques and to acquire needed skills.

For the Eastern Africa Division these are not new ideas. Over the past few years we have been conducting numerous educational seminars and studying the dilemmas of the Adventist teacher. For example, in 1985, a historic education seminar was held in Naivasha, Kenya. At this time, serious concern was expressed about the effectiveness of a certain teacher. Accordingly, a number of planning committees were held and a substantial portion of the division bursary fund was designated to educate and upgrade this teacher.

The seminar also helped educate administrators about the importance of professional upgrading for all teachers. Since then, a significant number of our teachers at all levels have taken time off to study for higher degrees.

In-service education has encouraged division teachers to expose their students to a variety of learning experiences such as observing, discussing, exploring, manipulating, experimenting, investigating, using hands-on experiences, analyzing, and in-depth probing. Administrators have discovered that enhancing teacher creativity takes time and effort, as well as

“We must help students to become mentally agile, emotionally resilient, and intellectually adventurous.”

much enthusiasm and dedication, but they are determined to continue helping Eastern Africa Division teachers to acquire and use a variety of effective teaching techniques. As a result, Adventist students who go through our educational system should be better prepared for productive lives here and for the world to come.

Conclusion

As we celebrate the Year of the Teacher in the Eastern Africa Division, we will continue to search for new ways to help our teachers make significant professional improvement. We hope that, with time and support, our teachers can become even more efficient and effective, as they prepare young people for eternity.

Adventist teachers in Eastern Africa are very special people, and we are really proud of them. □

Dr. T. H. Nkungula is Director of Education, Eastern Africa Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Highlands, Harare, Zimbabwe.

REFERENCES

¹ Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1968), p. 1.

² Ibid.

³ Carl D. Glickman, "Has Sam and Samantha's Time Come at Last?" *Educational Leadership*, 46:8 (May 1989), pp. 6, 7.

⁴ C. M. Clark, "Teacher Preparation: Contributions of Research on Teacher Thinking," *Education Researcher*, 7:2 (March 1988), p.5.

⁵ P. L. Peterson and C. M. Clark, "Teachers' Reports of their Cognitive Processes During Teaching," *American Educational Research Journal*, 15 (1978), pp. 417-432.

⁶ P. W. Marland, *A Study of Teacher's Interactive Thought*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation. (Alberta, Canada: University of Alberta, Edmonton, 1977).

⁷ Clark, p. 10.

⁸ L. S. Shulman, "Paradigms and Research Programs in the Study of Teaching: A Contemporary Perspective," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, Merlin C. Wittrock, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 3-36.

⁹ Mary Hatwood Futrell, "Restructuring Teaching: A Call for Research," *Educational Researcher*, 15:10 (December 1986), p. 5.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ M. Krause. *Professional Skills in Teaching*. Unpublished paper presented at Educational Leadership Seminar (Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, 1983).