Mentoring New Teachers

BY CAROLE B. SMITH

Teacher: one who teaches; esp. one whose occupation is to instruct.

That terse definition from Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary does not do justice to the profession of teaching or to the acquisition of skills and strategies needed by a top-rate teacher. It tends to define teaching as an accomplishment rather than a process and promotes the misconception that beginning teachers are "expected to do essentially the same job on their first day of employment as 20-year veterans." In general, the public assumes that pre-service methods classes, micro-teaching, and student teaching (along with the previous 16 years of school) sufficiently prepare teachers for their first job. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The Need for Mentoring

Armed only with simulated classroom experiences, a diploma, and proof of certification, anxious-yet-eager first-year teachers are ejected from the relative protection of the teacher-training environment directly into the uncertainties of the day-to-day classroom experience. Considering the individuality of the teachers, their different settings, and their varied training experiences, dealing with their concerns and needs becomes a very complex task.

Mentoring, one component of teacher induction, can be an effective means of addressing the problems and, in many cases, helps alleviate the anxieties of first-year teachers. Although new teachers' needs differ somewhat, research shows that to a greater or lesser extent they share a number of personal and practical concerns, including the following:

• Implementing effective discipline strategies;
• Learning about and functioning within the school culture;
• Motivating students and assessing their achievement;
• Communicating with administrators, colleagues, parents, and students;
• Managing professional time to accomplish teaching responsibilities while maintaining personal time;
• Finding resources;
• Using effective teaching methods and scheduling classroom activities;
• Coping with feelings of isolation.

Because the relationship between mentor and protégé is more personal than procedural, more changing than static, mentors can provide emotional support and practical advice in ways that help beginning teachers survive that critical first year.

First-year teachers typically possess three characteristics: they are often unfocused workers, meaning that they are unable to think of appropriate ways to improve their teaching; they are highly motivated and coachable; and they tend to be idealistic, with their expectations often exceeding what they can reasonably achieve. These characteristics point to the need and possibilities for teacher induction programs.

Mentors are experienced, skillful teachers who assist beginning teachers in their professional growth. They serve as peer-coaches as well as tutors, guides, role models, sponsors, counselors, resource personnel, and colleagues. Following observation in the protégé's classroom, the mentor can offer suggestions for pacing instruction, improving a teaching strategy, or implementing a different discipline procedure. The high motivation and coachability of novice teachers, along with their desire to succeed, affords the men-
Mentoring Within the Seventh-day Adventist Educational System

I conducted a mail survey of the 58 superintendents in the North American Division to see how they evaluated their induction programs, particularly in the area of mentoring. Of the 56 who responded, only four considered their programs “sufficient” for their beginning teachers; 26 reported that their programs were “somewhat insufficient,” 16 regarded them as “insufficient,” and 10 offered no program.

But those numbers offer little insight into how a successful mentoring program operates. I decided to find out for myself what obstacles first-year teachers face and how their mentors help them overcome those obstacles. To do this, I obtained permission to observe two novice elementary teachers in the Scenic Vista Conference. Julie Sanders taught second grade at Sandy Ridge School, and Jenny Hudson directed the advanced kindergarten at Aspen Hills School. Over a nine-month period (September to May), I collected qualitative data based on 78 hours observing classroom instruction, field trips, school chapels and assemblies, recesses, and lunches. I conducted a total of 22 interviews, each with Julie and Jenny, one with each of their mentors (Barbara McDonald and Ashley Duncan) and principals (Karl Johansen and Paul Kent), and two with the associate superintendent of schools, Evelyn Swartz, who also directed the mentor program.

The information I accumulated from interviews, classroom observations, reading the teachers’ weekly journals, analyzing the principals’ and teachers’ end-of-the-year self-evaluations, and reviewing the information presented at the Scenic Vista Mentor Seminar gave me a clear picture of the concerns and needs of two typical first-year Seventh-day Adventist elementary teachers.

The Settings

Sandy Ridge School is located in a large midwestern U.S. town. The 30-year-old facility has 22 classrooms, a principal’s office and large secretarial suite, additional rooms/offices for the assistant principal, a special educational tutor and academic therapist, a faculty lounge and workroom, a library, gym, cafeteria, and greenhouse. The campus is not large, but it does provide adequate parking space and a nice playground area. Day care and academic instruction for kindergarten through eighth grade are available at the school.

During Julie’s first year of teaching, 352 students were enrolled in grades K-8. According to Karl Johansen, the school’s principal, students represented 56 countries, and 87 percent of this total multi-ethnic student population were Seventh-day Adventists.

The school employs a full-time principal, an individual who serves as half-time guidance counselor and half-time principal’s assistant, one full-time and one part-time secretary, 15 classroom teachers, a full-time librarian, an art teacher, one full-time and two part-time music teachers, a special-education teacher, a treasurer, a full-time building supervisor with five student janitors after school, and one other adult who works four to six hours a day. In addition, the school employs drivers for its daily student bus service, field trips, and other school functions that require transportation.
Sandy Ridge School has an active Home and School and school board. Both groups meet regularly. The school also produces The Byline, a weekly newsletter for parents. Every other Friday, school chapels or assemblies are conducted for the entire student body.

Established in 1907, Aspen Hills School is located on the outside fringe of a large midwestern city. The current facility, built in 1938, originally had more land around it, but as the student population increased, building additions cut into the parking and playground area. The old building, enveloped by residential homes, is well maintained, and the grounds are attractively landscaped.

The school has little teacher turnover, and since 1936 has had only three principals. It provides day care and academic instruction in kindergarten through eighth grade. Aspen Hills has 12 classrooms, a library, a gym, music room, a principal's office, secretarial-accountant suite, and a faculty lounge that doubles as a sick bay. There is no cafeteria, but prepared bulk food, delivered each day by a nearby university cafeteria, provides hot lunches for students and staff.

During Jenny's first year of teaching, Aspen Hills School enrolled 48 percent black, 15 percent Hispanic, and 24 percent white students. According to Paul Kent, the principal, the school employs 50 staff—20 teachers (including three teachers' aides) and 30 auxiliary, mostly part-time personnel, including bus drivers. Enrollment has been as high as 500, but for the past six years has hovered around 300.

The school, accredited locally and regionally, has many strengths: a good academic program in grades K-8, an effective school-wide discipline plan, a school board that meets on a regular basis, an annual science fair and open house, stimulating school assemblies, and a stable, qualified staff. In addition to the monthly faculty meetings, group area meetings and administrative councils are conducted.

One weakness is their inactive Home and School. Principal Kent believes the reason for this is lack of strong leadership.

**From Training to Teaching**

Julia and Jenny were enthusiastic about their first full-time positions in education. Teaching was a goal they anticipated and pursued. Both of them had excelled in theory and methods classes and practice teaching. They enjoyed children and looked forward to interacting daily with them in a lively learning setting. They were eager to get started—and they felt ready.

"I waited a year after graduation to get this job. Finally being here as a teacher is a tremendous joy!" Julia exclaimed in our first interview. Jenny told me: "I'm glad I got my certification, and I'm definitely doing something that I really enjoy doing. I believe God has given me the gift of teaching."

It took only a few days of full-time teaching, however, for Julie and Jenny to grasp the magnitude of the assignment and for their bright outlooks to dim. Julie even began to question her wisdom in choosing teaching as a profession. Ryan calls this jolt from idealism to realism "the curve of disillusionment" and explains it this way:

> While student teaching is intended to allow the student teacher to experience actual teaching, the student teacher does not have the full responsibilities of teaching. There is much benefit in student teaching, in the opportunity to act like a teacher and to try out skills and ideas; but it is different from actual teaching."

Both teachers struggled with classroom scheduling and management, school routines and administrative procedures, and relationships with principals, peers, and parents. In addition, Julie grappled with time management and Jenny with curriculum issues. Both internalized the challenges encountered, but each reacted differently to the frustration. For example, Julie, who had initially described teaching as a "tremendous joy," now wondered if she should quit after a dissatisfied parent withdrew a student from her class. Jenny, who also lost a student in that way, did not consider leaving the profession but feared the parents' action would jeopardize her job. And both teachers worried about adequately preparing their students for the next grade. Jenny, who believed she had a "God-given talent for teaching," began to doubt her competence.

Julie and Jenny also responded differently to the impact of teaching on their personal lives. Julie, who spent much personal time trying to fulfill her teaching responsibilities and coping with various classroom and administrative frustrations, worried about the effects upon her new marriage. Jenny, on the other hand, seemed to strike a balance between her teaching and her personal life.

**The Mentoring Process**

The school principals provided no orientation for Julie or Jenny. Johansen did conduct one informal and one formal evaluation. However, Julie regarded the feedback from his evaluations as superficial, rather than something that would help improve her teaching. Kent conducted one evaluation for Jenny, but provided no feedback. At the beginning of the school year, the new teachers seemed to initiate contacts with their principals, but as the year progressed, the principals initiated more conversations. Kent helped Jenny with a difficult parent-teacher conference when she had to explain the reasons for retaining a student, and he also dropped in after school to inquire how she was doing. Julie felt that Johansen, at first, tended to ignore her. Later in the school year, he became more friendly but not specifically supportive. Neither teacher considered the overall administrative support satisfactory, and both expressed their need for new-teacher orientation with frequent evaluative feedback from their administrators. In addition, Julie would have appreciated more collegial concern from her fellow teachers.

Julie and Jenny credit their mentors, Barbara McDonald and Ashley Duncan, respectively, with giving them the support and guidance they needed to cope with their first year and ease into their second. For example, the mentors
Assisted their protégés with filling out administrative forms and understanding school policies and routines;

• Gave them advice about conducting parent/teacher conferences and supported them as they worked through difficult student/parent issues;

• Offered practical suggestions for dealing with curriculum and scheduling demands, classroom discipline, grading, and planning for special school events;

• Served as sounding boards and guides—and sometimes as advocates.

Barbara, for example, convinced the principal to give Julie more administrative support. Ashley became a mediator and peacemaker when Jenny was confused or upset by a colleague’s behavior or words. The mentors also suggested that their protégés consider specific courses for recertification and graduate work.

Protégés’ Concerns

Julie and Jenny viewed their mentors as helpful colleagues, and of all the relationships the two teachers developed during their first year, the mentor/protégé one became the most intimate. They did, however, express some frustrations with the mentoring process. Not until several weeks into the school year did the Scenic Vista Conference assign mentors, leaving both beginning teachers without help during those critical first weeks of school. Barbara assumed that her “open door” policy was beneficial, but Julie would have preferred to meet at a regularly scheduled time each week. Also, she was frustrated with their lack of opportunity to observe in each other’s classrooms. Although Jenny and Ashley eventually developed a trusting relationship, Jenny, at first, hesitated to confide in her mentor. Because the first three frustrations are technical ones that could easily be resolved in future years, and the other is part of building a relationship, Julie and Jenny saw the mentoring program as beneficial. Jenny’s final verdict applied to both cases: “She definitely helped me in all areas.”

Practical Applications

Julie and Jenny’s first-year experiences have implications for the Seventh-day Adventist educational system. The mentoring process should begin before novice teachers enter their classroom. Effective teacher induction involves more than just assigning a mentor.

Pre-service Educators. Quality training is, of course, the ultimate goal of the pre-service educator. It is important to place student teachers with experienced classroom instructors who can model effective teaching strategies, coach the student teacher, help with classroom planning, and provide opportunities for interacting with parents, attending faculty meetings, and participating in extracurricular school functions. Nevertheless, pre-service educators also must introduce student teachers to some of the clerical aspects of day-to-day teaching, such as filling out attendance records and health records, keeping track of permission slips and medical release forms, and the array of routine paperwork that is part of a teacher’s life.

Administrators. When considering induction programs for beginning teachers, superintendents and administrators must provide training for both school administrators and mentors. According to Wagner:

When asked to assume new roles, people need assistance and preparation. Whether new teachers, new teacher support providers, or administrators expanding group participation in decision-making, [each needs] the opportunity to develop new knowledge and skill in non-threatening, supportive environments. Mentors, principals, and site leaders need training in their roles as supporters of new teachers. New teacher coaches and college and university support personnel need help learning how to work with new teachers in their classrooms. Administrators, teachers, and program developers may need training in more complex approaches to new teacher assessment and support.¹¹

To accomplish those objectives, school administrators must conduct an initial orientation in-service to acquaint new teachers with school protocol, policies, and procedures. At this time, they should distribute new-teacher packets that include a school handbook and calendar, sample administrative forms, and a glossary of terms relating to the school or district. In addition, administrators should schedule regular, ongoing meetings throughout the year to provide much-needed support and clarification. To encourage novice-teacher feedback and verify beginning teacher concerns, administrators can administer needs-assessment questionnaires (See Figures 1 and 2) at the end of September and again in January.¹²

Administrators might also invite a pre-service educator from a local college or university to assist in beginning-teacher orientation and to continue to assist novice teachers throughout the year. This will help the new teacher make an easier transition and aid the teacher-educator in tailoring his or her coursework to prepare new teachers.

The third step is assigning each novice teacher a trained mentor, preferably someone who teaches the same grade or at least at the same level. When the mentor has been assigned, the administrator should schedule meetings with the beginning teacher, mentor, and principal, and plan regular meetings when novice teachers can interact with one another. (Showing staff-development videotapes and inviting guest speakers can add variety and develop expertise.) In addition, the administrator should arrange for substitute teachers so that the mentor and protégé can have release time to observe in each other’s classrooms. Novice teacher needs vary, so following initial observations, the administrator, in consultation with the mentor and beginning teacher, should arrange for additional observations as necessary.

New teachers need time and experience to become veterans. According to Doyle, it takes at least five years for novice teachers to master their craft.¹³ Since mentors are not evaluators, the school principal should conduct frequent informal and formal evaluations with pre- and post-evaluation conferences. “A system for feedback needs to be established to help novice teachers reflect on their growth in that first year.
of teaching."

Mentors. One of the keys to successful mentoring is the match between what the protégé is, knows, does, and needs and what the mentor provides. Each protégé enters teaching with basic needs, yet is unique. A mentor, therefore, must assess the protégé’s strengths and weaknesses and design an individual program for him or her. Sullivan suggests that the mentor consider how he or she can be a “screen, an avenue, a wise counselor, support, and a role model.”

Establishing rapport—and doing so early—is crucial. Otherwise, the relationship will be ineffectual. Once rapport is established, the mentor should arrange for regular meetings where mentor and protégé can have uninterrupted time for discussion. At these meetings, the mentor can help to orient the novice teacher into the school culture, listen to concerns, and share personal experiences. By observing the protégé’s teaching, the mentor can make recommendations to help him or her grow professionally. And by inviting the protégé to his or her classroom, the mentor can model effective teaching and classroom-management strategies.

Beginning teachers must understand that the first year of teaching is a transitional one during which most new teachers need assistance. If a mentor is not assigned, the beginning teacher should seek out someone to help with the problems and adjustments of that first year. To find a mentor who is competent and trustworthy, as well as willing and committed to being a coach and confidant, the new teacher may need to ask for recommendations from the pre-service educator, the superintendent of schools, or the school principal. "The only thing worse than having no mentor is having a poor one."

Conclusion

My own research³⁴ and that of McCune³⁵ clearly demonstrate that new teachers within the SDA system believe that beginning-teacher induction and orientation are crucial for their professional growth and personal job satisfaction. In addition, these studies indicate that novice teachers want and expect such support from their principals. They firmly believe that mentors are necessary, especially during the initial period of adjustment.

The challenge of education in general, and new teacher preparation and support in particular, defy simplistic approaches. However, the process of collaboration and the creativity that can result from multiple perspectives and resources have the potential to generate the solutions that will be needed to meet the complex challenge within education.³⁶

Mentors can supply that much-needed creative and individualized support.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES


8. To protect the privacy of educators portrayed in this article, I have changed names and identifying details.


10. Ibid., p. 10.


15. Sullivan, p. 11.

16. Ibid., p. 3.

17. Ryan, p. 33.

18. Ibid.


20. McCune.