

Mentoring Teachers

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It was a lovely fall day. The wind was blowing leaves about the school yard, and children were dashing into the building, a bit late for the first bell. As I passed the school secretary, she gave me a cheerful smile and waved me on, aware that I had arrived to support one of the new teachers.

As I walked to the teacher's classroom, children stared up at me, wondering who I might be. One child asked, "Are you the people who is looking at us and telling our teacher how good she is?" Another said, "I know you, you are the lady who sat in our room all day in first grade!" Out of the mouth of babes! I was the "people" who told their teacher how good—how very good—she was. And, yes, I sure do sit a lot as I observe and mentor new teachers.

Having spent 25+ years teaching young people, it is a delight to have the opportunity to pass on some of the "wisdom" I have gleaned over the years. It is also wonderful to get back into the elementary classroom and soak up the innocence and joy still prevalent—especially in the younger grades.

Every class, every teacher, every classroom, and every school I visit is unique. The strengths and challenges of each teacher vary, but there is a characteristic that almost all the teachers I observe have in common—they are nervous about being observed. Though the teacher knows the primary purpose of visits from the Office of Education staff members is to support, it is not comfortable to have someone sitting and writing madly in the back of the room. Even when the face of the person writing madly is a familiar and friendly one, the teacher asks him or herself, what are they writing now? Did they see me fumble for the words as I gave directions? Did they notice that I wasn't sure about the answer to a student's question? Why didn't I have all the materials ready to go? Every normal, day-to-day error takes on new meaning.

Those of us given the awesome and mostly enjoyable task of mentoring teachers expect many missteps, misspeaks, and mistakes in the course of the day. We have all been there, done that. We are fully aware of the multitudinous opportunities for mistakes that a day with students, colleagues, administrators, parents, and our own families presents to us. What we look for is how many and how big? We also look to see if the teacher is aware of the mistakes and what she or he does to handle them. We especially look to see how the teacher responds when the mistakes are pointed out—is he or she ready to learn and move forward for the sake of the students and the school?

Sometimes teachers ask us to join in a class activity or help with projects. Though this is fun, we generally like to sit at the back and watch because it is our job to assess how teachers handle each of the activities they plan for their students as well as the students' response to the activities. The big exception to this is worship. A huge perk of the job is participating in worship—classroom or chapel. There is little that is more stirring than a group of children—big or small—praying, singing or listening to stories from the Word together. In just the last few weeks my own spiritual welfare was deeply affected by the worships I had the privilege to

observe.

The purpose of the support work we do is to help teachers to grow in their jobs. I believe all of those involved in this work would agree that we grow as well. As a teacher of teachers, I am continually being given fresh examples of what I am trying to give to my education students. Because I have been away from the elementary classroom for a number of years, I need to be reminded of the challenges of meeting so many students' needs, of being cheerful all the time, of teaching even when you have a fever of 103 because getting ready for a sub (if there is one) is so difficult.

Mentored teachers often ask, "If there is one thing you are looking for in a New Church classroom, what might that be?" For me, the answer is easy: "What is the purpose of New Church education?" Yes, I answer a question with a question. Through the years, I have noticed that teachers with a clear, ready answer to this question often have a better handle on everything they do. They have an orderly classroom so that the Lord and His angels feel welcome. They view each child as a potential angel because they know that they are helping him or her to prepare for this world and for heaven. They bring the Word into many classes and teach from doctrine because they know that it is through His Word that students can come to know, love, and serve the Lord by serving the neighbor. They are able to see that New Church education is something bigger than their classroom, their school, or even the General Church—they see it as something that could change the world.