

THE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR

The Teacher as Minister to Children and Parents

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THE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR

Several years ago as I read Dicken's Christmas Carol one section made a lasting impression. In it Scrooge was reminiscing with the Ghost of Christmas Past about his first employer Fezziwig and explaining why that man brought back such fond memories. He said,

He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. Say that his power lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant that it is impossible to add and count 'em up; what then? The happiness he gives, is quite as great as if it cost a fortune (Dickens, 1985, p. 49).

I reflected on how true this statement was for me as an employee, and then it struck me that it also applied to my classroom where I as "employer" had the power to set the tone for the day, the week, and the year for my roomful of "employees". Beyond the classroom, my ability to work with the child's family, the words and looks I used, the time I took to listen and care, could have a lasting influence on his life and the lives of other family members.

THE MULTIFACETED ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR

Lutheran school teachers play an important part in molding the children's view of God, life, work, play, justice, interpersonal relations, self-esteem, and a myriad of other values. By example they also provide a positive role model for the parents on what views they, as Christians, should hold to and on how to interact in a positive manner with their child (Fredericks, 1988). What an awesome responsibility God has placed into our hands! What a blessing that He also provides the wisdom, ability, and strength to fulfill it!

Good teachers consider teaching in their classroom to be their primary calling. They are as well prepared as possible to teach each lesson and are flexible enough to present the material in more than one way, if necessary. They keep current on changes and advances in the field of education and strive to be aware of new materials and ideas and use those that will improve their ability to help children learn.

However, interpersonal relationships with the people, the blood-bought souls of, first and foremost the children, but also the parents, fellow staff members, principal, pastor, and others will be more important than perfect lesson plans or outstanding bulletin boards. Once the mechanics of the teaching process are in place, it is really in dealing with people and their needs that the whole thing comes alive and grows and becomes a blessing which can touch and change lives and make a real difference here and in eternity.

How Teachers View Their Role

To determine how my colleagues in the field view their role as professional educators I asked the Western Wisconsin District teachers attending our February, 1988, conference to fill out the questionnaire which you will find in Appendix A. Forty-three teachers responded to my request.

Areas of Help and Guidance Provided Parents

In question one I asked teachers to indicate the areas in which they were interacting with parents beyond the routine reporting of grades.

Table A

<u>Number of areas</u> <u>marked</u>		<u>Number of</u> <u>questionnaires</u>
0	- - - - -	1
1	- - - - -	11
2	- - - - -	8
3	- - - - -	12
4	- - - - -	4
5	- - - - -	4
6	- - - - -	2
9	- - - - -	1
		<hr/> 43

Table B

<u>Area</u>	<u>Number of questionnaires</u>
Child rearing, discipline	37
Marital difficulties	9
Spiritual questions, problems	18
Personal problems	20
Unchurched parents needing spiritual guidance	8
Alcoholism	4
Child abuse	6
Drugs	2
Others	7

Mentioned under "others" were medical problems, hyperactivity, suspected vision problems, petit mal seizures, depression, ADD, learning difficulties, beginning and continuing family devotions, divorce, separation, parent out of work, neglect, and verbal abuse. It is evident that the respondents have helped parents deal with a wide range of needs.

An Increased Need to Help Parents

Most teachers also perceive the need to help parents to be increasing. In question two I asked, "Do you feel that the need for the teacher to provide help with family problems is increasing?" 36 responded "yes", six said "no", and one did not respond.

Four of those responding "no" made comments. They said:

- * In our community I haven't noticed an increase. In general though I would say yes because I feel our community is sheltered.
- * I don't feel it is the place of the teacher except as it may occur incidentally. Our calling is to the children.
- * The CD teacher can't be all things to all people. Rather encourage the family to seek help.
- * WLCFS is for this service.

Even these responses admit that the need is there. It is merely a question of who should fill it.

Those who said "yes" often made comments referring to the increasing number of broken homes and single parents. In connection with this is the single parent with a

non-Christian boyfriend or girlfriend that they are dating or living with.

My personal experience bears this out. In the 1984 - 85 school year 12 of my 32 third and fourth grade students were children whose parents were either separated, getting a divorce, divorced, or remarried. It was a very challenging year in the classroom and many of the behaviors I had to deal with seemed to be caused or at least increased by the home situations.

Even intact families are struggling, as one teacher stated, to "get their priorities straight. God first--family next--children are God's blessing to a marriage." I often find that parents are having a very hard time viewing their children as a blessing, particularly if they are having serious academic or behavior problems.

Other teachers wrote "Parents seem to be at wits end and sometimes sound as though they have given up", "Our families don't hide problems like they did 10 yrs. ago.", "So many problems they just pour out!", and finally, "Teachers have a lot to do in their ministry already but 'If not us, then who?'".

FACTORS AFFECTING THE TEACHER'S ROLE

In the next section I will discuss how the role of ministering to families is currently affected by time constraints, training, and inclination.

Time Constraints

There is no doubt that the Christian day school teacher has a lot to do. Classrooms are often filled to capacity, many teach in multiple grade rooms, serve as principal, coach, play organ, direct choir, teach or supervise Sunday school, VBS, Pioneers, Youth Group, serve on committees, and even clean their classrooms. So in question three I asked, "What amount of time do you feel you can devote to this type of ministering to families?"

Forty wrote responses and here are some of them.

- * Not much time available
- * As much as necessary--within time restrictions of job
- * Not able to give enough time--mentally and emotionally draining
- * 15-20 min./day at school (more out)
- * Whatever time would be given to this would have to be taken away from other areas of ministry

- * Must do it after school or in the evening
- * Minimal time available unless other duties are reduced
- * There isn't much time left after teaching, coaching...
- * Presently, not much
- * It takes lots of hours
- * I'm open to the idea, but we are taxed (time) beyond our limits now
- * Little time available, without neglecting own family
- * Not enough to do a complete job
- * Only incidental if I am to continue to be an excellent teacher, always well-prepared
- * Little
- * Could give 60 min./month
- * Whatever is needed--I wouldn't want it to be so time consuming that it becomes detrimental to my own family
- * Very little--I would like to, I have 24 hrs. in a day and my teaching must come first. It would be a blessing...but how do you schedule such time when you have family and teaching and your own self-care to fill a day
- * As much as needed and my physical and mental health allows
- * Very little
- * Only enough time to be a sounding board
- * Willing to listen (hour here and there) but try to refer to qualified help
- * Sporadic as it comes up
- * Not much due the fact these parent(s) rarely appear for conferences, etc.
- * Some--to children not to adults
- * A couple hours per week
- * As much as I could--as much as I can physically and mentally handle but there are many families that need so much.

A few respondents seemed to feel they had more time. Here are their comments:

- * 5 to 10 hrs./week
- * Lots -- incidently
- * Impossible to put a time amount on this. Whatever is necessary.
- * Usually after school; evening
- * An hour/day (2)
- * As needed (3)
- * How can we put a time amount here?
- * How can a time frame be put on when someone is in need?

I think this last question is a vital one and I will be returning to it later in this paper under the section titled "The Crux of the Issue".

Training

One teacher stated, "I'm not sure I'm qualified to minister to the whole family, but I am trained to teach." Many teachers responding to the questionnaire and most of those I've talked to personally seem to feel inadequately prepared to deal with the magnitude of some of the problems they are facing.

To better prepare myself to handle my teaching duties I have gone on to graduate school. A number of my courses have dealt, either incidentally or directly, with parent and family conferencing, involvement, or counseling. Although I have learned much, I also now know how much I don't know.

Inclination

In the questionnaires and my personal discussions with and observations of WELS teachers in my 14 years of teaching I've seen a wide range of attitudes regarding how much ministering to families should be done. The factors influencing those attitudes are numerous. At this point I would like to focus simply on five attitudes, beginning with some that are rather negative. (It's always nice to end on a positive note.) The * comments are direct quotes from the questionnaires.

(1) There is the "Let George do it" view.

- * Is this our calling? Isn't this why we have pastors?
- * If I wanted to help families I'd become a counselor and let someone else handle the classroom.
- * WLCFS is for this service. The family life is a totally different profession--it requires full training.
- * Too often too many teachers feel they are the child-rearing experts and just ache for the opportunity to tell parents how to raise their children. God did not give the child to the teacher, but to the parent.

(2) There is the "I'm too inadequate to do it" view.

- * I don't have the academic training and just wouldn't know how to help somebody.
- * As a single teacher I don't feel I have the experience to advise a parent.

(3) There is the "There simply is no time" view.
(These were amply covered under time constraints.)

(4) And there is the "I'll do some, but not too much" view.

(Again see time constraints.)

(5) And then there is also the "I'll do what I can" view.

- * It's good to be involved with your families.
- * If I can help one family in some way it would be worth every minute of my time.
- * I do what I can, refer when I can't.

NEEDED CHANGES IN TRAINING PRESERVICE AND INSERVICE TEACHERS

If all, or even the majority, of our teachers are to feel that an important part of their role as a professional educator includes a fairly extensive ministry to families, a number of changes must be made in both preservice and inservice training.

Preservice Training at DMLC

My training at DMLC in 1970-1975 had its high and low and strong and weak points, as it would have at any college. Three areas in which instruction was definitely deficient were classroom discipline, interpersonal relationships, particularly with parents and co-workers, and discussions of serious problems, such as, substance abuse and child abuse in our Christian homes.

Judging from what the books, journal articles, and position and research papers say about education in the past two decades, DMLC does not stand alone in these areas of deficiency. Williams and Chavkin (1985) state:

From the teacher's perspective, increased contact with parents has added to the demands traditionally associated with the teacher role. Teachers are now expected to develop skills in working with parents and taking leadership roles when working with advisory groups. These are in addition to the fundamental skills they must acquire which pertain to classroom instruction. Although additional teacher competencies are needed due to the increase of parent involvement,

they are generally not addressed in the professional training programs for teachers. Training for teachers has continued to stress classroom teaching skills while often neglecting the new skills where teachers involve parents in the education of their children both at home and at school. (p. 3)

See also (Maggs, 1980; Meighan, 1981; Southwest Educational Development Lab, 1981; Williams & Stallworth, 1982; Halliwell, 1979; Kroth & Krehbiel, 1982; Stallworth & Williams, 1981). Although other teacher education programs have neglected the same skills, it is definitely time, if it has not already been done, to address these areas and strengthen the instruction in them as much as possible.

Classroom Discipline.

Before any thought can be given to ministering to families, the ability to maintain good classroom discipline must be in place. If the teacher is unable to handle his or her class it is unlikely that any parent would ask for help or take suggestions or advice very seriously.

The instruction given preservice teachers at DMLC must pertain to the types of situations currently facing teachers. Establishing and maintaining control is more difficult than it was in the past. Children often do not enter school with a well established respect for authority. I have found that good consistent Christian discipline is usually the exception, not the rule. Quite a few kindergarten parents I see have not established their authority and are "losing the battle". Some of the upper grade children I work with pretty much do as they please, those parents have "admitted defeat".

Interpersonal Communication Skills.

I feel the following quotes underscore the need for training in communication skills. "The teacher's role has changed drastically from being the only person responsible for approximately thirty children to including relationships with other teachers, paraprofessionals and parents in new, exciting, but thought-provoking and challenging ways." (Gordon & Breivogel, 1976, preface, p. IX.) "Teachers and parents must enter into an interaction believing that each other is truly committed to the child's welfare (Rutherford & Edgar, 1979, p. 20). "At the heart of effective parent-teacher conferences specifically and the

parent-teacher relationship in general are interpersonal communication skills. Communication is the key to good home-school relations." (Rotter, Robinson & Fey, 1987, p. 10)

In many cases the foundation for a good home-school relationship is laid or lost at the home visit which many teachers make before the school year begins. This is the opportunity for any teacher, but especially for a teacher new to a school or to teaching, to let the parents know what his/her standards and expectations will be in the areas of discipline and academics. It is also an opportunity to witness in a natural and easy way while discussing what will be covered in Bible history or catechism class. A caring and competent tone can be set by the teacher and reinforced by verbally encouraging the parent(s) to feel free to get in touch any time there are questions or concerns (Dawson & McHugh, 1987; Des Moines Public Schools, 1978; National School Public Relations Association, 1968). The parents begin the year with a good feeling about the teacher's professional ability and his/her Christian love and concern for their child and for them.

It is not enough to assume that the principal will guide the new teacher through the procedure. He may also be a new teacher and time certainly will be too limited to provide more than a brief summary of a general procedure. DMLC should be doing direct instruction in this area.

Parent-teacher Conferences.

Parent-teacher conferences are another opportunity to build rapport with the parents. Hertel (1977) says, "The parent-teacher conference is the most direct and most meaningful mode of communication between the home and the school" (p. 31).

There seems to be a consensus among researchers that communication skills are an essential element in determining the success or failure of the conference. (Stephens & Wolf, 1980; National School, 1968; Demos, 1986; Rotter, et al, 1987; Hunter & Lawrence, 1977) The "teacher must assume primary responsibility for making the meeting productive, pleasant, and rewarding." (Lombana & Lombana, 1982, p. 37).

I personally believe parent-teacher conferences are very important. I have seen them help build rapport with parents, and I have seen them cause a teacher to have major parent problems for the remainder of the school year. I approach my conferences with plenty of prayer and good preparation, and even then I am sometimes nonplussed by the turn the conversation takes. I learned a good deal about having successful parent-teacher conferences from my

principal and fellow faculty members during my first years of teaching. I doubt that many other beginning teachers were and are so fortunate. "It should also be noted that many researchers have pointed out the lack of attention paid to assisting teachers in developing their conferencing skills in either preservice or inservice education." (Rotter, et al., 1987, p. 10)

Discussion of Serious Family Problems.

Considering the prevalence of child sexual abuse (Peters, 1986) and alcoholism (Spickard & Thompson, 1985) in our society and the fact that Christian homes are not immune to these and other evils, preservice teachers need to be made aware of the warning signs that may indicate there is a serious problem in some area. The issues should be discussed at DMLC. Perhaps they could be covered in several lyceums conducted by Christian professionals who deal with these problems on a regular basis.

Implementing Curriculum Changes.

At the minimum the DMLC curriculum should include a three credit course devoted to understanding and dealing with problems in classroom behavior from the Christian perspective. The course should be designed to give students an opportunity to discuss various approaches to handling individual and group behavior in the classroom and to apply these approaches to actual simulated, or if possible, real problem situations. Emphasis should also be placed on how to prevent behavior problems through the development of effective classroom procedures.

If various aspects of interpersonal communication skills, with a special emphasis on home visits and parent conferences, are thoroughly covered in a two or three credit course, the beginning teacher will gain a good foundation on which to build a God-pleasing ministry to the family. The instruction should include the purposes and goals of home visits and parent-teacher conferences, a discussion of how to handle negative remarks about the school, the previous teacher, other children in the class, other parents, and a wide range of other complaints and concerns. Modeling of good procedure by the professor, and role playing of typical and not-so-typical situations will help students internalize the needed skills. (Every year I have at least one or more "Surprises". One of the more unique home visits I heard about included the child running back and forth on the top

of the back of the sofa on which the teacher was sitting while she and the parents visited. And I will always remember one of mine where the husband was not allowed to enter the room without a special invitation from me and permission from his wife.)

In order for all DMLC professors to be able to realistically prepare teachers to face the new challenges that our changing society has brought into the classrooms and home-school relationships, they need first-hand experience in the field. Every five-to-seven years they need to leave the college and spend time teaching in their own elementary classrooms, or at the very least, they should be out in the classrooms regularly working with children for an extended period of time, preferably a full school year.

I am convinced of this because in my post-graduate classes where the professor was currently in an elementary or secondary classroom teaching, testing, or supervising, the instruction we received was much more useful, practical, and realistic than anything taught by someone who had not spent time personally wrestling with the current problems. Nothing can substitute for first-hand experience.

INSERVICE EDUCATION

In question five I asked, "Do you feel that more emphasis on family ministry would be a blessing to your teaching or a detriment?"

Table C

<u>Responses</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>
Blessing	28
Detriment	8
Combination	2
Answer not applicable	3
No answer	2
	43

The majority viewed an expanded ministry as a blessing, but as I stated in the section titled "Training", and as the following quotes from WELS teachers indicate, there is a need for additional education in order to change and broaden currently held views and provide inservice teachers with the needed skills and a degree of confidence. The following quotes from the questionnaire underscore this need:

- * I feel that dealing with family problems is the realm of the pastor or professional counselor.

- * The classroom offers an over-abundance of challenges. The family life is a totally different profession --requires full training.

Therefore I would encourage DMLC to continue and expand their inservice program of workshops, advance study programs, courses and individual study projects to include and emphasize classroom discipline, home-school visits and home-school relationships, parent-teacher conferencing, interpersonal relations, communication skills, counseling techniques, parenting, and training parents in parenting.

Principals need to be trained in how to help and guide beginning and "veteran" teachers in the above mentioned areas. They can, and generally do, play a vital role in influencing how parents view the home-school communication set-up, and they also set the tone for the communication among the staff. Good public relations skills are vital. (Hirsch, 1983).

Pastors need to learn to communicate openly with the principal and faculty, and vice versa, if a true ministry to families is to exist. It is with the pastor that the faculty needs to thoroughly discuss and set-up guidelines regarding ethics and confidentially, when to refer for help, and when to seek guidance. Pastors should share counseling techniques and encourage the spiritual health of the faculty, as a whole, and of the individual members, as well. This is vital, since it is only when Jesus is truly the Lord of a person's life can the service to others really be the blessing God intended.

As I mentioned under preservice training, alcoholism and child sexual abuse are two of the many problems facing some Christian families. In order to recognize them knowledge is needed. The recent WLCFS workshop on child abuse conducted in my area this summer by our area WLCFS counselor was very helpful and opened my eyes to a number of things of which I was totally ignorant. I would encourage more of this type of training to make and keep inservice teachers informed on topics of current concern.

The BPE and WLCFS could assist both pastors and teachers by supplying annotated bibliographies, lists of audio-visual materials, suggested course names and descriptions at DMLC and/or public universities, and lists of available speakers on pertinent topics. In areas where WLCFS is not available, perhaps the BPE could serve as a clearinghouse for names of good Christian counselors and clinics, since obviously there will be instances where professional counseling is the only acceptable answer. In some areas congregations might consider joining together and hiring a counselor to serve their schools and congregations, and WLCFS or the BPE could assist them in setting up guidelines and getting the program off the ground.

THE CRUX OF THE ISSUE

Unfortunately, the idea of expanding the teacher's role is of limited value and, in some cases, a virtual impossibility unless something can be done to adjust the teacher's workload and remove some of the current time constraints. The responses to question three on time which I covered quite thoroughly in the section titled "Time Constraints" shows this to be a vital issue.

Workloads and Burnout

Since preparation for teaching, the actual teaching, extracurricular duties, such as coaching, choir, and organ, and interacting with students, parents, and co-workers can become a 24 hour-a-day job, the balancing of professional and personal needs must be handled carefully and prayerfully.

In Mark 6:30-31 we read:

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." (NIV)

Jesus himself set us an example here. Taking sufficient time for personal rest and recreation is necessary to avoid burnout or resentment which would seriously hinder the quality of teaching and personal interaction. (Albertson & Kagan, 1987; Freedman, 1986; Raschke, Dedreck, Strathe, & Hawkes, 1985; Harris & Assoc., 1985.)

Possible Solutions

In question four I asked, "If you wanted to greatly increase your ministry to the family what assistance would you need in your teaching?"

Table D

<u>Responses</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>
Teacher's aides	10
Parent helpers	9
Education	4
No assistance	9
No answer	9
Other	7

Responses under "other" included: pastor's and trained counselor's help, experience as a parent, I'd change professions, have extra duties removed, receive congregational help with choir and sports, have a Synod newsletter telling what other fellow workers have done counseling, and have the parents enroll in peer counseling type support groups.

I am not sure where the solution really lies, but I am convinced that the teacher workload is an area that must be carefully and prayerfully addressed if teachers are to feel that they have the time and the physical and emotional stamina to devote to expanding their ministry to parents.

In conclusion, I would say that doing this presentation has been a blessing to me as it has forced me to face some big frustrations in my current teaching situation and search for God-pleasing solutions.

Because I teach kindergarten half days, and have a remedial and gifted program in the other half day each year I work with 60-70 children for varying amounts of time each week. Each day requires considerable prep time, and although I use parent helpers and volunteer teacher's aides, the "buck" still stops with me. Keeping the principal and fellow teachers informed on pupil progress and working together on problems and individual programs is also time consuming.

Although there is some duplication because of siblings, I am involved in some capacity with children from about 50 families, many of whom expect some of my time, help, and guidance. I know some big needs are going unmet. Lack of time, and physical, mental, and emotional limitations have simply forced me to curtail my ministry in that area.

If I were to expand my ministry to families in any way, it would be possible only if I taught half days or greatly reduced the number of children I teach and spent the remaining time preparing for teaching and working with families.

Considering the children's needs and the current financial situation of my congregation, neither of these options is feasible. I must simply do what I can. I begin each day with the prayer that my Lord will help me to balance work and play, prayer and action, and then I pick my priorities with His help and do only what time allows. If someone feels it is not enough, I no longer worry, because my Lord can say, "Well done!", and that is enough.

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Appendix A

Dear Colleagues,

I've been asked to present a paper on the teacher's ministry to families at a workshop sponsored by DMLC in the fall of 1988. I'd appreciate your input on the topic. Please answer the following questions. If you have any additional comments please feel free to add them on the back, speak to me in person, or mail them to me at your convenience. Thank you for your time.

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1. Please check the areas where you have provided parents with help and guidance.
 - _____ child rearing, discipline
 - _____ marital difficulties
 - _____ spiritual questions and problems
 - _____ personal problems
 - _____ unchurched parents needing spiritual guidance
 - _____ alcoholism
 - _____ child abuse
 - _____ drugs
 - _____ others (please describe)
2. Do you feel that the need for the teacher to provide help with family problems is increasing? Comments?
3. What amount of time do you feel you can devote to this type of ministering to families?
4. If you wanted to greatly increase your ministry to the family what assistance would you need in your teaching? teacher's aides? parent helpers? or?
5. Do you feel that more emphasis on family ministry would be a blessing to your teaching or a detriment? Please explain.
6. What training do you feel DMLC should provide in the area of counseling and ministering to parents and families?
7. Please give a title and brief description of any courses you have taken since college graduation which have helped you deal with family and parent problems.

