

# Teacher Isolation

## *Loneliness in the Classroom*

BY SAMUEL GAIKWAD AND  
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**D**ebi Miller is single and a recent college graduate. Last August she was assigned to a one-room school some 75 miles from the nearest metropolitan area. The only other adult in her classroom is a volunteer parent who comes once a week for crafts. Debi feels desperately alone and wonders if she can finish the school year.

- Ken Davis teaches academy business subjects. During a typical school year, he is assigned a work load that keeps him closely confined within his classroom. Ken's busy schedule makes it difficult for him to visit other classrooms and gather ideas for teaching.

- Lynn Hathaway lectures on history at a Christian college. A consummate researcher, Lynn takes little time to socialize with her colleagues. Her students complain that she is distant and difficult to reach when they need help.

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Teacher isolation is a paradox. How can a teacher feel lonely when the classroom is a veritable beehive of activity? Time and motion studies indicate that the act of teaching involves as many as 1,000 interchanges during the course of a day.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, studies conducted by Goodlad,<sup>2</sup> Lortie,<sup>3</sup> Flinders,<sup>4</sup> and Firth and Mims<sup>5</sup> reveal that isolation is a widespread and chronic problem among teachers. It is related to stress overload, stagnation, and burnout. Moreover, isolation is not restricted to particular types of schools or levels of education.<sup>6</sup> However, isolation is by no means a uniform phenomenon.<sup>7</sup>

Isolation comes in several forms.<sup>8</sup> "Egg-crate" isolation refers to a physical separateness where teachers have little contact with other professionals. Students and their teacher enter the classroom, the



door is closed, and the group meets in relative isolation. Such classrooms have been defined sardonically as "a group of cells connected by a parking lot." Egg-crate isolation may be further intensified in small schools where teachers are far removed geographically from peers and support staff.

*Psychological isolation* is a state of mind

rather than a condition of the workplace. It involves the teacher's perceptions of collegial interactions. In Goodlad's 1983 report summarizing his study of 1,350 elementary and secondary teachers,<sup>9</sup> many teachers perceived themselves as isolated. They felt unfit to affect schoolwide decisions. They did not wish to call upon

resource people, and tended not to receive peer support.

In *adaptive isolation*<sup>10</sup> teachers are unable to meet the demands of adapting to new teaching strategies. They feel overwhelmed in trying to acquire and use new resources. According to Grumet,<sup>11</sup> teachers feel isolated and burned out not so much because of overwork, but because they feel responsible for the experiences of children, yet forbidden to freely determine those experiences. This, she feels, is the result of centralized administration, state testing agencies, and textbook publishers.

**A**lthough researchers call the above conditions isolation, it is evident that what one teacher or group of teachers regard as isolation may be termed by others as individual autonomy. What some consider isolation within four walls, others may see as protection from outside chaos.

When teachers complain of feeling isolated, it is reasonable to expect a negative impact on their attitudes and energy levels. As with Elijah, isolation is likely to result in burnout and feelings of intense vulnerability.

### Isolation in Seventh-day Adventist Schools and Colleges

To what extent do secondary teachers of SDA schools in the North American Division (NAD) experience professional stagnation and isolation? What conditions account for these perceptions? Project Affirmation studies of nearly 1,600 elementary, senior academy, and college teachers indicate that teachers on every level desire greater professional interchange.<sup>12</sup> Approximately six out of 10 teachers said that their organizations needed to make more provisions for teacher-to-teacher interchange.

In a study commissioned by the North American Division Office of Education, senior academy teachers rated teacher stagnation and isolation the fourth major problem in a list of 13 widely diverse teaching challenges.<sup>13</sup> A follow-up study in 1989<sup>14</sup> showed that isolation is statistically related to the lack of effective teaching methods as well as inadequate budget for classroom instruction.

## How can a teacher feel lonely when the classroom is a veritable beehive of activity?

### Ways to Reduce Isolation

1. *Develop teaching competency.* One of the best ways to reduce isolation is through professional development. Teachers with a repertoire of effective teaching methods are more likely to feel in command of the classroom and empowered to seek out additional ways of improving their teaching. Joyce and Weil, in their book *Models of Teaching*,<sup>15</sup> describe a collection of well-researched teaching strategies. However, to understand and internalize these models, a five-step learning strategy is essential. The five steps are as follows: (1) understanding the theory behind each model, (2) carefully observing the demonstrations, (3) practicing the model a number of times, (4) receiving feedback on practices, and (5) participating in follow-up activities, such as peer observation, coaching, and study group meetings.

**S**uccess is achieved only through extensive staff development programs. It would be beneficial to set aside budgets for in-service staff development activities and follow-up.

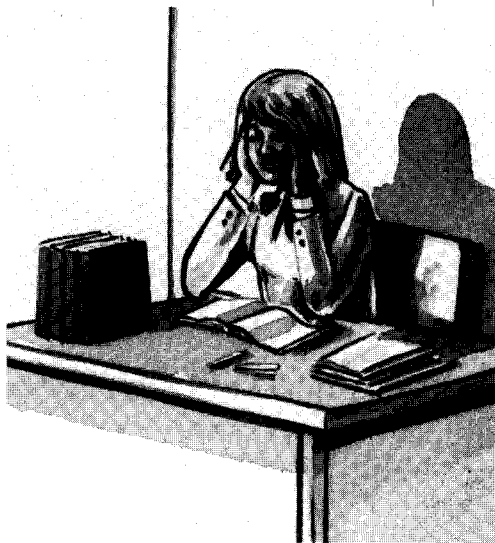
2. *Provide structured opportunities for upgrading.* Another technique to reduce feelings of isolation is to provide teachers with opportunities to upgrade their present educational status. Teacher workshops, summer graduate studies, and other forms of in-service development increase teachers' feelings of self-worth, belonging and collegiality.

3. *Build staff rapport.* Schools without a well-developed democratic structure should hold seminars to build rapport. A high level of trust among teachers is needed to facilitate the frank exchange of ideas. Through workshops and seminars educators can become aware of teacher isolation, its effects on personality, and methods for coping with the problem.

Well-planned social activities enhance communication, reduce barriers, consolidate

old friendships, and help develop new ones. Social gatherings should be free of school business talk and relatively unstructured. A weekend retreat or campout can work wonders in stimulating a tired school staff to cooperative action.

4. *Organize teacher study groups.* Teachers practicing a new instructional strategy can form a study group. This group can provide support for each member. If a teacher does not understand a procedure or content, others in the group can help. Since no one is an expert, each member feels important and can share his or her ideas freely. Research conducted by S. Gaikwad<sup>16</sup> and P. Gaikwad<sup>17</sup> show that study-group meetings really worked to establish and sustain implementation of two new teaching strategies. The teachers and principal meet once a week to discuss their successes and failures. Increased feelings of belonging, and subsequent free



and frank exchange of ideas in such groups have reduced isolation and improved teacher performance.

5. *Encourage teacher participation in decision making.* Instituting democratic norms in schools is key to raising school morale. When the school administration includes teachers in making decisions, teachers feel important and needed. They are more willing to support the decisions made and to bear the consequences. When teachers participate in decision

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making, they feel less isolated.

6. *Insist on teacher accountability.* When teachers participate in decision making, they should be held accountable for the

decisions they make. Teachers feel less isolated when they feel others are interested in the quality of work they do. They should be affirmed for meeting their classroom goals.

7. *Collaborate.* Teachers can build networks in a number of ways.

- Several conferences use retired teachers as coaches and consultants. Retired teachers often have the time, interest, and expertise to assist in special school projects and programs. They may volunteer their time or work where budgetary limitations preclude regular supervisory help.

- The Potomac Conference has established an effective mentoring system linking beginning teachers with more experienced classroom personnel.

- Teachers in the Carolina Conference have formed informal Sunday study groups to discuss the implementation of teaching models. Teachers swap ideas and assist each other on problem areas.

- Teachers from small schools in the Ohio Conference at one time formed a drive-in support group.

- Teachers from the Illinois and Georgia-Cumberland conferences have formed support groups on cooperative learning.

- Adventist colleges have faculty with specializations in various areas of teaching. Such faculty can offer telephone advice or make on-site observations of teachers wishing to utilize their services. At least one college keeps in touch with its graduates to identify and solve emerging problems that occur during the trying first year of teaching.

8. Teachers must maintain a close companionship with God. All the strategies mentioned thus far will meet success only if the teacher maintains a positive relationship with God. Ellen White<sup>18</sup> recommends friendship with Christ as a wedge against loneliness and isolation. This friendship involves constant communion with God, making the Word of God the teacher's guide.

In the book *Education*,<sup>19</sup> Mrs. White suggests that parents and teachers should work together for mutual support. Let us remember that "we are members one of another" (Ephesians 4:25). "They helped every one his neighbour; and every one said to his brother, Be of good courage" (Isaiah 41:6). ☞

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