

An Open Letter to Elementary Teachers

The high school teachers are depending on you. Please don't let us down.

By Lou D'Amoré

I suppose it really doesn't matter how my grade 9 science students spell as long as they can get their message across. After all, as a science teacher, what's the difference what I teach cause my greater concern is whether my student problem solve so they can reach their potential. I only wish that students do not leave my course board and that they realize that science is one of the most important subjects nowadays.

Everyone knows that communication skills take lots of time to learn which means that maybe we shouldn't get too uptight when a student makes mistakes. There's no pressure, students will learn when they are ready. I myself am a lifelong learner and hopefully my students will be also. Besides, most students are beginning to buy bigger computers and that will help them write better. I wrote this on a computer and I am a scientist.

The mistakes in the preceding two paragraphs were lifted from the final examination papers of 14 grade nine science students. All were members of my last semester grade nine class, which had a total of 30 students.

When my very best grade nine students, who have the brain power to tackle complex topics like metric conversions and density, spell words like salt 'slat', use 'muve' for move, and do so repeatedly throughout their test paper, I get concerned. I wonder why these children were not made to learn correct spelling, when it's obvious to me that they have long passed the intellectual development stage required to deal with the skill.

When my poorly-achieving students use the word 'as' for at and spell simple words like then, where, was and don't incorrectly, then I become alarmed. After eight years of schooling, many of these students still don't know the difference between 'to' and 'too.' I despair when I think of the kind of chance I will have teaching these same students the difference between the concepts of cell respiration and photosynthesis, when it appears that it might take the full semester just to teach them how to spell the words!

When I see students who cannot write on the line, who admit their writing is nearly impossible to read, whose notebooks look messier than a pile of old newspapers in a recycling bin, I see the symptoms of undisciplined young minds who have little appreciation for order and pattern — central attributes of any good scientist. I puzzle as to how to get these students excited about the order and patterns that exist in our natural world.

When I hear the media and the Ministry talk about the future and the need to prepare our students for the coming technological age, I worry how my students will be able to buy carpet for their homes, when most have a very limited understanding of the concept of area. I wonder how some will buy milk and cheese, when they don't know the difference between a litre and a kilogram, and then I break into a cold sweat when I think of teaching density, which demands that students think in terms of both volume and mass at the same time!

When I hear people telling me that today's children grow up with pressures never before experienced, and that the education system is doing the best it can under the circumstances, I think of children who grew up during the war and the depression and wonder how they managed to deal with what seems to be a considerably more demanding curriculum.

When elementary schools graduate children who are not ready to deal with the grade nine content, I wonder if they realize that this sabotages the secondary school system and limits what we as subject specialists can teach.

When high school teachers in our community deal with adults who are innumerate, illiterate and poorly-skilled, I wonder how many stop to realize that many of these people were once just like the students we pass on and think we'll never see them again.

It is true. Elementary teachers have the most important role in education.

(Lou D'Amoré is a science teacher at Father John Redmond High School in Etobicoke.)