

Teaching in a Third World School

Effective change and meaningful commitment to quality must start right at the top.

By A. Teacher

Sometimes I can't understand what Ontario teachers are whining about. They complain about their working conditions, class sizes, the adequacy of textbooks, the scarcity of resource personnel and supplies ... HAH! They should try teaching in a third-world school. They'd sure appreciate what they have now.

Fortunately for me, I saved up books and things from the past — so I came here pretty well prepared. But young teachers just starting out get a rude awakening. They sometimes face 40 surly young people, many of whom don't want to be in school at all on a hot, humid day.

The children's parents send their kids to school — most of the time — but they have mixed feelings about the value of education. On one hand, it's supposed to open doors but, on the other hand, it prevents children from making a financial contribution to their families.

Our windows are old and open only part way. The old chalkboards, our major 'audio-visual' aid, are chipped, stained and almost impossible to read. Some of the students have to wear the same clothes several days in succession and the, er, atmosphere intrudes upon the consciousness of the highly refined.

Our teachers would like to give the students decodable reading books, quality texts, reference materials and workbooks but, for the moment, blackboard work has to suffice. At least they do learn their sound-symbol correspondences this way!

Many students have little slates to write on too, making short written responses and spelling or math practice feasible. Our principal pooh-poohs the idea that books are needed to teach reading. "In my day, we all learned by recitation!" she is fond of saying.

Sometimes, though, I can't help dreaming of the things I used to enjoy. Libraries. Music. TVO. Books. Films to introduce geography or his-

tory topics that help to bring alien concepts to life. Audio-visual materials, bulletin boards, laminating....

We desperately need good books to give the kids some incentive to read. And we have virtually no reference books. Good math books would be invaluable, and so would Cuisenaire rods and base 10 blocks.

Although there's a lot of bullying and fighting among students, sometimes involving weapons, we do manage to keep the lid on. We keep the kids occupied, often positively engaged, and most do learn something. But for the students with special needs, it's a farce. No appropriate program for them! Hello, Social Darwinism — it's survival of the fittest!

I think I do teach the students something, but nothing like as effectively as I used to. Even though I now wonder whether learning is more closely tied to culture and background than I previously thought, I don't for a moment believe the children's circumstances mean they can't learn.

But they clearly need more intensive and targeted teaching, and different, varied resources. Some need other supports — food, clothing, medical care. A longer school day, and 'study time' available at night. The whole community needs to be involved in seeking solutions.

Government officials claim there is money available for the initiatives we need, but somehow it never trickles down to the schools and the poor kids. We hear stories of bribery, mismanagement and corruption, but of course we don't really know where the money goes. All we know is that it doesn't get to *our* kids.

What needs to change? Clearly, someone high up has to make the education of these kids a priority. They need to be guaranteed access to basic supplies, good materials, trained teachers with access to central resource support, and specialized instructional programs.

Somebody has to care enough to monitor what goes on, get input and feedback from the local level, and develop an action plan with a long-term commitment — a 10- or 15-year plan would be a start — and follow through on it.

It doesn't even need to cost a lot of money — although it would need some additional outlay and careful prioritizing of spending. That spending should be controlled by the local people — maybe a community council or perhaps a staff-community committee.

These kids and teachers are every bit as capable as any — in fact, I think our teachers are overall even more dedicated and hardworking — but they don't have anything like the resources privileged kids enjoy. This is where elected officials *must* step in and enforce equality of opportunity.

I guess the tropical heat must be getting to me. I lean out the window to get a little more air. It doesn't really clear the brain, as the polluted air from local industry and passing vehicles assaults the lungs, but on a clear day I can see the CN Tower sparkling in the distance. The third world is not as far away as you thought!

It can be found in Ontario's northern boards, in economically-depressed rural areas, and in inner-city schools where the parents are not sufficiently savvy to demand and track their fair share of government funding.

The only way to remedy this situation is for the government to channel its funding directly to the schools, thus bypassing the organizational ineptitude along the way. Schools should receive their funding direct from the top.

(The author is an Ontario teacher who prefers to remain anonymous and in a position to assist needy students. Enquiries can be sent to OQE, however, and they will be answered by the author.)