

## Electronic Reserves

### WELCOME TO THE ELECTRONIC RESERVES COURSE READINGS

#### WARNING CONCERNING COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship or research. If electronic transmission of reserve material is used for purposes in excess of what constitutes "fair use" that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

**No Further Transmission or distribution of this material is permitted**

**TITLE:** Lessons from Today's Classroom

**AUTHOR:** Sr. Mary Jane Herb

**SOURCE:** Momentum

**PUBLISHER:**

**YEAR:** November/December 2001

**PAGES:** 28-30

**File #:** 060712013\_Herb

Final thoughts  
for this special  
theme

# Lessons from Today's Classrooms

**Mary Jane Herb, IHM,  
Ph.D.**



**S**ynchronicity is the energy that comes when things or events come together and connect at a particular time. We know when we experience this phenomenon. Something comes together for us that we didn't plan to happen and new energy is created or potential solutions emerge. Synchronicity is the best way for me to describe what I experienced during this past year in my ministry as superintendent of schools in the Diocese of Albany, New York.

In my position as superintendent, I made it one of my priorities to remain in touch with what I call the "real world." Last fall, I asked principals to schedule a time when I could come to a regularly scheduled faculty meeting or a time when the faculty would be willing to stay after school for about an hour. Throughout the year, I attended a faculty meeting at approximately three-quarters of our schools. What a delightful experience this was.

My original intention was to make a short presentation and structure time for discussion with the teachers and other staff members. During the previous summer, one of my col-

leagues introduced me to the book, *Jesus the Teacher* (Horne, 1929/1998 revision) and this became the theme of our conversations. Ordinarily I would not pick a book published in 1929 to use with current teachers. However, this gave me an opportunity to explore with the teachers the model of a teacher we have in the person of Jesus and to offer reflections on the Catholic identity of our schools.

In *Jesus the Teacher*, Herman Horne identified six characteristics of teaching that I chose to share with the teachers. These characteristics prompted discussion of the gifts and challenges that face Catholic school teachers. In the context of talking about the teacher, student, environment, curriculum, aims (i.e. Catholic identity) and teaching methods, the teachers shared with me and each other insights based on their experience.

As I met with teachers, I wondered: Where will we be in the future? Who will be in these classrooms five years from today? Next year? As I met teacher after teacher, whether veteran or novice, their reflections gave me insights. What began as a simple way for me to connect with

*"As essential as it is to  
have just salaries, job  
satisfaction is measured  
in more than a  
paycheck."*

teachers provided insightful data for a much bigger question

After I completed each school visit, I returned to my office to record the data received regarding the gifts and challenges our teachers face. I began to see that, in Albany or in the many arch/dioceses

around the country, these insights could assist us in recruiting and retaining our teachers. I analyzed the data and identified five gifts and challenges that I believe can assist us in filling our classrooms for tomorrow. The gifts become points of emphasis as we recruit teachers to share in our mission of teaching in a Catholic school. The challenges, I suggest, are areas that we must address if we are to maintain teachers today and into the future.

## Gifts of Teaching in a Catholic School

### Faith-filled Environment

Teachers value the Catholic identity of our schools. Within this environment, they are able to teach from their hearts, no matter what their field of expertise or their faith tradition. Many teachers mentioned that the

---

**Sister Mary Jane Herb, IHM, Ph.D.,**  
is superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Albany, New York  
(jane.herb@rcda.org).

songs chosen for concerts do not need to be limited to ones that have no mention of Jesus, that their classrooms can be decorated in a manner that expresses a Christian perspective and that morality can be integrated into the curriculum. Teachers feel the freedom to express their religious belief and are not ashamed to share their faith life with students. In many cases, teachers mentioned how they have grown personally in their own faith as part of a faith community within the school.

### **Freedom Within Teaching**

Teachers feel free within their classes to experiment and structure lesson plans to meet student needs. Within their classrooms, teachers determine the needs of the students and respond professionally to meet the needs in ways they believe appropriate. There is little "red tape" because teachers determine materials for their classes; they make decisions in the best interests of the students.

### **Parental Involvement**

Students within a Catholic school are enrolled because their parents or guardians believe that this is the best educational environment for them. The payment of tuition indicates an investment on the part of the parents. Teachers know that parents are interested in their child's education and often take an active role in assisting the teacher, addressing problems where needed. Parents become supportive in helping the teacher achieve classroom goals. Parents, as the primary educators, assume a key role in the education of students within the Catholic schools.

### **Atmosphere or Environment**

Faculty members expressed the belief that there is a sense of community within the school and among the teachers. Regardless of the size of the school, each student is known by name and every effort is made to make sure no one falls through the

*"...if we do not provide supportive services to the teachers, we do an injustice to students and teachers alike."*

cracks. In difficult times there is a feeling of a supportive community shown through a loving presence and prayerful support. Teachers know that they can count on one another in everything from gaining insights into class or coursework to finding a listening ear when they are struggling with challenges in the classroom.

### **Rituals and Celebrations**

The teachers spoke about the importance of common prayer. Coming together for liturgy not only speaks of the school's Catholic identity but it provides time to worship together. So many times the discussion focused on the challenging lives of the students within their classrooms. That conversation was balanced with the opportunity to bring these situations to prayer. Teachers also spoke about their personal growth in prayer and the gift that is to them.

### **Challenges of Teaching in a Catholic School**

While the gifts of teaching in a Catholic school are bountiful, my conversations revealed a number of challenges as well.

#### **Financial**

Salary is one of the major obstacles we face in our efforts to recruit and retain teachers. Teachers expressed satisfaction in knowing that schools and the diocese were working to increase salaries. Gratitude was expressed for other benefits such as access to professional development, reduced tuition in Catholic schools and other non-monetary benefits.

### **Lack of Resources**

Financial limitations also mean limited materials within the classroom. Teachers often find it necessary to purchase classroom materials at their own expense. While they appreciate freedom in the selection of textbooks, often there was no additional funding available for materials to enhance instruction. Some teachers looked at this as a creative opportunity but, nonetheless, a challenge. While technology is available, in some cases it is not up-to-date or there are no resources for in-service training in the integration of technology into the curriculum. Schools need to look to business partners or have specific goals for fund-raising efforts of parent groups in order to supplement resources.

### **Parental Involvement—Again**

Parental involvement is both a gift and a challenge. Parents, having the best interests of their sons and daughters at heart, often interfere with the instruction in the classes. With the changing family structure, teachers sometimes find themselves unprepared to deal with the complex situations of custody and other issues. With the best interests of the child in mind, teachers often become entangled in the divorce or separation issues of the adults. Specific guidance needs to be given to teachers to deal with these matters and, where possible, to take them outside of the classroom to be dealt with by the administration.

### **Standards and Curriculum**

As states move toward a standards-based curriculum, teachers feel the pressure of more and more content with less and less time. In many states, such as New York, teachers find the need to comply with the state education department, but nothing is done to adjust the schedule of the day or to give necessary support to the teachers. A more critical issue for Catholic schools is the importance of teaching religion. Unfortunately, in

some schools teachers do not believe they have the time to dedicate a class period to religion because of the demands to meet state instructional standards.

### Varied Student Needs

Perhaps the major challenge facing teachers within Catholic schools is not unlike the challenge faced by our colleagues in public education. Students come to school today with many and diverse needs. While living out our mission of Catholic school education, we wish to serve all students. However, if we do not provide supportive services to the teachers, we do an injustice to students and teachers alike. Many teachers are not prepared to deal with today's changing family structure and learning needs of students. To meet the complex or demanding needs of students today, teachers must have both the resources and the skills that will enable them to respond to these needs.

Today and in the next few years, we face the critical issue of finding competent teachers who not only are willing to teach in a Catholic school but who also are committed to the mission of our schools. At the faculty meetings I attended last year, I encountered teachers who found the experience of teaching in a Catholic school to be life-giving. In our teacher recruitment materials, we need to emphasize the culture within our schools. As essential as it is to have just salaries, job satisfaction is measured in more than a paycheck and we need to capitalize on what we hear from our current teachers.

Teachers appreciate an environment that is rooted in the values of our faith and in classrooms where they can determine the methods and materials for teaching with the loving support of parents and guardians. The sense of community that is fostered provides a rich and rewarding experience that is enhanced by common prayer experiences.

In the same vein, continued efforts must be made in upgrading salaries for teachers as well as pro-

viding necessary resources for the classrooms. Ongoing in-service for teachers can be an attractive benefit to meet changing classroom needs. In the push to a standards-based curriculum, we need to be aware of the impact that has on the classroom. While state standards must be met, we cannot place an undue burden on the teachers. Most importantly, we need to continue to make the teaching of religion a priority despite the additional demands placed on us.

Recruiting and retaining the teachers of tomorrow is an ongoing challenge. This challenge could be made easier because of the teachers in our classrooms today. Let us listen to them and continue to foster the faith community that they value and work to meet the challenges so that a brighter tomorrow begins today.

### Notes

Horne, H. (1998). *Jesus the teacher: examining his expertise in education*. (Rev. Ed) Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel. ■

*"Teachers appreciate an environment that is rooted in the values of our faith, and in classrooms where they can determine the methods and materials for teaching with the loving support of parents and guardians. The sense of community that is fostered provides a rich and rewarding experience that is enhanced by common prayer experiences."*

