

## Mentoring or Big Brother?



In the responses to the June 2002 edition of Educare Hanni Boker mentioned that having an educational mentor was very important for any parents considering the use of the local schools. The line of thinking was that the mentor would see things that the parents would not see or could not anticipate as consequences in years to come. A very similar issue was raised at our conference in May 2002 in Germany. Concerned team leaders were asking to what extent they should be free to advise families and even intervene if something were to go wrong. We support Hanni's recommendation and would extend this to cover the full range of educational options, not just the use of local schools. It can be very easy for parents working in isolation to drift off track educationally from the re-entry needs of the children, or for serious welfare concerns to arise from the use of an educational system that the parents may be unable to see. Examples could be the choice of a curriculum that would set the children one, two or even three years behind their passport country counterparts in the long term, or difficulties relating to other children stemming from exclusive use of a home based system. These are only examples and each choice of educational system could have major and unforeseen implications for the children that competent people already in the situation could help a family be aware of. At what point though does guidance become or begin to feel like surveillance? What needs to happen for an advisory and/or supervisory arrangement to work?

Firstly there needs to be a mutual willingness to listen to each other and to enter in to the necessary relationship for it to happen. In many people's minds the idea of guidance and accountability is an alien and even an unacceptable idea. One only has to browse some of the Western home education web sites to see the very strong anti-authoritarian sentiments expressed there to see that. Some of the fall out from the shepherding movement of the 1970s and 1980s is that many people are very wary of any kind of officially organised structure in the church or in mission circles; personal freedom is the virtue that they would stress. The problem with such sentiments is that they may reflect ignorance or past negative experiences rather than Biblical values. The simple and direct wisdom of the Proverbs for instance tells us

"Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise." (Proverbs 19v20)

It also says

"Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." (Proverbs 15v22)

Biblically, we are to seek advice and learn from it and act on the wisdom that is given in it. Note that the second reference makes the point that many advisers are needed. This would prevent overdependence on one adviser who could well be wrong in some respects or even the development of a controlling and unhealthy relationship. The other side of the arrangement is that of the team leader who needs to be willing to advise or help arrange something with a more competent delegated person. Team leaders should not be shy of doing this for whatever reason as competent local advice is necessary in any given situation and is at least as important, if not more so, than advice from the home country.

Secondly the arrangement will not work without a degree of relationship and friendship. If we set systems that are cold, clinical or merely “professional” we will miss a vital element in this. If a leader only has a distant relationship with a family in the team, then any advice given will seem more like interference rather than genuine care and concern. Of course, this relates to all areas of team and family life and ministry not just to the education and welfare of the children. The relationship needs to be forged from the very first contacts with the family by correspondence and strongly cemented in the orientation period after arrival. If team members know that the leaders have their best interests at heart, then giving guidance and advice, even if it cannot always be positive, will come so much more easily and naturally later on. If the mentor(s) or adviser(s) are not the team leaders, then it is equally important to have them in touch with the families and to be building the relationship as soon as possible. Advice from interested friends is far more likely to be received well than advice from a distant power.

Thirdly, there is the question of competence. The word has already been used a few times in this article and that helps emphasise its importance. When I recently had a number of problems with my teeth, I did not go to see a supermarket manager to have them sorted out – I went to the dentist who did a good repair job on them. A supermarket manager would be able to give me the right advice on many other issues, but is clearly not the right and competent person to repair my teeth. Similarly, there are many talented people in our teams or in similar teams from other organisations, but they are not all competent to give the right advice on educational matters. We have met some people in field situations, who will freely give their advice, but who are neither qualified nor experienced and are therefore not sufficiently competent to give it. There are others whose own track record shows that they have jumped experimentally from one educational “solution” to another for their children. Again, such people have shown that they are not really the right people to give advice to others – except perhaps not to do the same! Beware too of those whose advice is always very strongly in favour of one solution for all children in all situations and who are negative about other choices. This applies across the range – to home schooling zealots, the ‘local school is always the best option’ types, the ‘never board your children’ brigade, the ‘board them or else’ variety etc.



The people giving advice need to know the whole family, understand the local situation and the logistics of the different possibilities and be able to give unbiased advice as to the best option at the time for your child. They also need to be able to recognise the positive signs that the child is doing well or the warning signs that there are problems, and be able to talk honestly and openly about that with the parents. Ideally among the advisers there will be other parents who have walked the same road and teachers who can help parents assess the educational validity of the different options. Advisers from the passport countries who have no international experience may well be able to offer good advice, but their understanding of the local scene is limited. The same can be true of teachers who have recently arrived; we have observed many teachers change their perceptions and opinions in the face of the reality of the experience in the international setting. This is not an overnight process and so there is no substitute for real experience. The advice should enable each family to make the right decisions and get realistic progress reports. It should not be heavy handed, trying to compel others into the “correct” choice, but it should be pastoral and guiding. A word of balance is needed here though. If a child is obviously struggling or will struggle on re-entry, because of poor choices now, then the team leader will need to be ready to intervene. It can happen that others can see what the parents do not see; occasionally they may be the last people to really acknowledge the problem. In such a case it is only right for the sake of the children to intervene and steer the family back on course. For the overall welfare of the children and the family, some degree of insistence may be necessary. Another scenario that would demand attention would be that of parents coming under another very forceful personality

influencing them along their own agenda – e.g. pushing or forcefully persuading those parents to use the local school or a home education option that is unsuited to the needs of the child.

In summary, if this is to work there needs to be

- A willingness from the team leader and the parents to work together
- A relationship with the advisers that is built from the very beginning
- Confidence in the advice given, knowing that it is based on both qualification and experience

If you have any experience of mentors and advisers in this capacity – whether you feel it worked well or not – we would like to read your comments and include responses in the next Educare.

## Responses to the Security Issue

Since the last edition of Educare in December 2002 we have seen the outbreak of war in Iraq, underlining the dangers of our world and our potential vulnerability as expatriates. World-wide security alerts have been sent out and international schools have implemented procedures in case of a terrorist backlash. This makes the subject of security introduced in the December Educare one of paramount importance to us as a mission and an international community of MK teachers and carers. We received a few responses to the last edition, but would welcome more, especially as there are good numbers of people now receiving back copies as they request to be added to the circulation list. These are the responses received so far.

“A thought on the security issue of large schools. VIS was a safe place for kids to be during the unrest in Cote d'Ivoire from 1999 to October 2002. It only became unsafe when the rebels moved into the area. I feel that the benefits socially and educationally for MKs to be in schools like VIS outweigh the risk, at least in Africa where the MK schools have never been a target. “

(Liz Durben – formerly at VIS)

Other comments came through in conversation, but the gist of them is that we cannot fully know what area is or is not safe. Originally both the sites of VIS and BCS were in safe parts of the world, but both have been overtaken by external events and have had to move and temporarily merge. The comments also extended to the idea that we can't simply close down all of our overseas schools on the grounds that the part of the world that they are in may become unsafe.

If you have any comments having only recently received the December 2002 Educare as a back copy or if you have any other thoughts in the light of the war, please e-mail them to us for us to include in the June 2003 edition.

**E-mail now!**

# Where have all the Teachers Gone?

(For that matter, where have all the administrators, caterers, houseparents, secretarial and maintenance staff gone as well?)

One of the recurring themes of any international school that does not offer full salaries is recruitment. We spent almost every year at BCS wondering where next year's staff would come from. There were times when we did well for teachers (perhaps 2 out of our 9 years there) but were left wondering about the houseparents, and other times where we had too few teachers or no secretary or no caterer or... The situation was much the same at VIS and this scene is repeated in school after school around the world; we even heard of one school recently that has NO staff in place for the coming academic year yet! The current recruitment situation to send out staff is not encouraging. We know of only a handful within WEC who are due to go out to fill vacancies for the coming academic year and the lists from the schools get no shorter. We need staff for situations where there will be crises leading to closures and/or limited places with long waiting lists without them. If this happens, there will be families leaving our fields of service because of the lack of suitable educational provision for their children. Another consequence will be the toll on the existing school staff who have to work extra hours to compensate for the shortfall. What are the problems that we are facing, and what can we do about them?

## The Problems

- The average length of time spent in our schools is going down. Short-term workers are looking more frequently at one year or even less rather than two or three. Long-term workers are often only fitting 4 to 6 years before leaving. This is all part of the cultural shift away from long-term commitment and possible life-long decisions in the West. All of this means that the turnover of staff in the schools is accelerating and that each year sees a crisis of recruitment and staff in our schools.
- The positions are not salaried. This proves to be a deterrent to the prospective staff and to their churches, where the idea of "voluntary" service is becoming less acceptable. So many are unwilling to accept the reduction in living standards that an unsalaried position would bring. The problem has become so acute for some schools that they are now offering partial salaries or support packages which are helping recruitment, but which push costs up for missionary families. Sometimes the extra costs incurred in doing this prices families out of the school. Relatively few churches are willing to provide proper support for teachers and other MK workers, thinking that they should be paid a salary – like teachers in the home countries.
- Recruitment is declining in the Western sending nations generally; this is part of the same phenomenon. Teachers and other MK support workers are less likely to be recruited from the emerging sending nations at the moment.
- Are we missing out on the big recruitment events organised on a joint-mission basis? My impression is that we are and that it is to our own detriment as well as to the schools that we recruit for.
- How effectively are we publicising our needs in as many ways as possible? In particular do we need to look at web-site information stressing how important the role of our teachers and other MK workers actually is and how many of them that we need?
- At the moment there is fear of travelling and volunteering for overseas ministry in the light of the war. This does seem to be affecting recruitment, at least for short-term workers, across most missions.



## Possible Solutions

In all of this it is vital that we pray for the Lord's wisdom and leading. He is the one who will send out the workers into the harvest, so we need to be hearing from Him and working as He leads. A clever idea may be no more than that – just a clever idea. Without God's leading into it, it will not succeed.

Here are some ideas worth considering in the efforts to recruit.

1. We need to be actively recruiting staff for our MK schools and families all over the WEC world. We cannot afford to wait and hope that teachers and other support workers will apply to the mission and then try to find a place for them, we need to get out there and recruit. How and where?
  - a) At teacher training colleges. Can we try to follow up any openings that we may have to encourage young newly qualified teachers to take out a year or even more in one of our schools? It would also be a good group to reach in terms of planning for a longer-term option after gaining a few years of experience in the home country.
  - b) In school and university Christian Unions. We know that it's never too early to present the need of mission, but we can also present the opportunities that are there for gap-year work and long-term ministry in the schools.
  - c) Among active retirees. What strategies do we need to adopt to recruit among this growing group? There are already a number of good examples of actively retired staff working in our schools, how can we encourage many more to do the same? There is a great advantage here in that they are older and financially independent, and so have fewer problems persuading their home churches of the wisdom of such an idea.
  - d) Ensure that we are there at the major inter-mission events where recruitment takes place. Even if there is no rapid and direct recruitment for the effort that we put in, we raise our profile so that we are less likely to encounter the "Who are you?" type of questions. We need to make it widely known that we are eager to recruit teachers but also that we want administrators, houseparents and other practical staff.
  - e) Organise recruitment events of our own where there is an obvious gap in the inter-mission network. We can initiate some of the joint-mission ventures as well as join in.
  - f) Develop the web-site to stress that we are recruiting a whole range of MK workers. The BCS page makes that clear, but how about a robust presentation of the needs and the opportunities on there for WEC as a whole?
  - g) In our own churches. We could be talking with potential staff about the possibilities of a career break year or of long-term commitment. Word of mouth recommendation is probably our most successful tool at the moment.
2. We need to be spreading the message that working in one of our schools or teaching children from one or more of our families can be extremely rewarding. We can in all honesty say that there were many times when we reflected on the fact that there was no other place that we would rather be than teaching at Bourofaye. I know that many other MK workers would say the same thing. There are not the incessant discipline battles in the classroom as the vast majority of our children are well motivated. There is the pleasure of teaching rather than being a crowd controller as in so many state schools. The children get to know the staff extremely well and lifelong friendships may well be forged.
3. We can also spread the message of God's faithfulness to us as a mission and as individuals in terms of His provision financially and in ability to face the unfamiliar situation. It involves material sacrifice, but the rewards are both eternal and here and now.

**We'd be excited to hear from you on this one, especially if you have some good ideas that we can share around with others.**