

What Makes Educators Read?

Report on the First Survey of Adventist Teachers' Reading Habits

Also, Teachers React to the Journal

BY BEVERLY J. ROBINSON-RUMBLE

How much do Adventist teachers read? What are their motivations for reading professional journals? Why don't they read more? What kinds of activities do they value for career advancement? What do they think of *THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION*? Do they find it readable, interesting, and attractive? Do they think anyone other than teachers should receive the magazine? What topics and authors do they prefer?

As editor of the *JOURNAL*, these were some of the questions I set out to answer in a study that integrated a master's thesis and a survey of Adventist educators in North America.

In January 1992 I sent a survey form with a covering letter to a randomly selected group of Adventist teachers and

administrators in the United States, Canada, and Bermuda. Names were obtained from the *SDA Yearbook* and lists of teachers produced each year by union conferences.

Of the 781 educators contacted, 347 (44 percent) responded. The return was large enough to allow some conclusions about the opinions and habits of various categories of educators. Responses were correlated with teaching experience, age, type of school, job description, geographical location, family situation, and gender. For example, by using two- and three-way crosstabulations it was possible to analyze differences between male and female teachers employed at the elementary level, or to compare reading habits of older and younger educators.

Figure 1 shows some demographic information about

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Figure 1
Demographics of Survey Respondents

Size of School	
Fewer than 20 students	11 percent
21-50 students	12 percent
51-100 students	13 percent
101-300 students	22 percent
301-500 students	8 percent
500 students	7 percent
More than 500 students	19 percent
Other/no answer	8 percent
Sex	
Male	49 percent
Female	51 percent
Education Level	
College degree or less	14 percent
Some graduate study	25 percent
Master's degree	31 percent
Some doctoral study	9 percent
Doctoral degree or beyond	19 percent
No answer	2 percent
Years in Education	
One year or less	2.9 percent
2-4 years	6.9 percent
5-10 years	16.1 percent
11-15 years	17.9 percent
16-20 years	18.7 percent
20-29 years	22.8 percent
More than 30 years	12.1 percent
No answer	2.6 percent
Age	
Up to 29	5.5 percent
30-39	22.2 percent
40-49	37.5 percent
50-59	24.2 percent
60 plus	8.9 percent
No answer	1.7 percent

the educators who responded to the survey. The largest subgroup was multigrade teachers, followed by college and university personnel. Survey respondents were about evenly divided between men and women, although women tended to cluster in elementary education and teaching, rather than administration or higher education. The typical educator who filled out the survey was married with children living at home, had spent 10 or more years in education, held at least a master's degree, and was between 30 and 60 years old. Thirty-six percent worked in schools with fewer than 100 students. Geographically, the largest group (25 percent) came from California, followed by Michigan and Washington State, with about 7 percent each. Seven percent lived outside the United States.

Both educators and administrators gave high marks to the JOURNAL's layout and design, readability, and interest level (see Figure 2). They said they read most items in the magazine at least occasionally. Interestingly, a number of people who didn't receive the JOURNAL regularly claimed to be frequent readers of some of its departments.

Target Audience

Who should the JOURNAL target as its audience? The overwhelming majority—including those who did not get the magazine—thought that elementary through college-level teachers should receive it. Survey respondents also suggested that a wide variety of other people should receive the JOURNAL, such as educational administrators, pastors, school board members, and college education majors.

Preferred Topics

What do Adventist teachers want to read about? These article topics received the highest ratings:

- Teaching methods (both general and specific subjects),
- Integration of faith and learning,
- Values and ethics,
- Worship ideas,

- Teaching various skills to students,
- Teaching and learning styles,
- Classroom management and discipline,
- Religious education,
- Communication skills,
- Basic thinking skills,
- Research on SDA education, and
- Relationships with parents.

Like other studies of educators, this survey found that teachers preferred practical materials that they could use in the classroom, although many expressed in-

terest in research articles and topics dealing with ethics and Christian philosophy.

Who Should Write?

Popular authors included classroom teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and administrators. There were, however, significant differences between men and women, and between older and younger educators on this question. Women were much less likely to prefer articles by administrators, and younger educators held college professors in higher regard as authors than did other age groups. Multi-grade teachers and those with less than a master's degree were least likely to want to read articles by researchers.

Reading Habits

How much do Adventist teachers read? Not very much. About half said they spent an hour or less a week reading professional materials, and 81 percent spent three hours or less. The amount of time spent reading professional material varied with a number of factors. Most important was the level at which educators were employed. College and university personnel read more than elementary or secondary teachers, and administrators read more than non-administrators. Older teachers read more than younger ones, and teachers with a year or less of experience read least of all.

What Do Adventist Educators Read?

About three-quarters of the educators responding to the survey said they had read a professional journal in the past month. However, only about half said they frequently read a magazine in their discipline, and even fewer regularly read a daily newspaper or weekly news magazine. College and university personnel and those with more education read more widely in journals and news sources. Women gave higher ratings to reading books, while men were more likely to say they read journals for professional enhancement.

Figure 2
Opinions of the JOURNAL

Survey subjects were given a list of journals, and asked if they read any regularly. At least two-thirds to three-quarters of the educators gave a 0 or a 1 (out of 5) to *Learning '91*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, *Educational Leadership*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Education U.S.A.*, *Change*, *Review of Educational Research*, and education journals produced by other denominations.

Why They Don't Read More

Why don't educators do more reading? Some 84 percent said that they were too busy. Other reasons, such as readability, cost, difficulty of obtaining materials, and satisfaction with the amount of reading done lagged far behind busyness as a reason for not spending more time reading.

More than a third of elementary teachers said that the material was too expensive, compared with 18 percent of academy and college educators. Elementary teachers were the most likely to say that the materials were boring, college and university personnel the least likely. More elementary and secondary teachers and those with lower levels of education said they had difficulty obtaining professional reading matter or that the material was too technical.

Professional Activities

Adventist educators value a number of activities for professional enhancement. At least two-thirds of those who responded to the survey considered enrolling in classwork, reading books, attending seminars, reading professional magazines, and attending in-service meetings to be important or very important. Slightly less than half rated visiting other teachers' classrooms to be as important, although elementary teachers were especially enthusiastic about such

opportunities. One teacher wrote rather wistfully, "but that isn't done around here."

The majority of respondents wanted to read articles by classroom teachers, but writing for publication was not a priority for most educators. Apparently, SDA classroom teachers expect somebody else to write the articles they want to read.

Female college professors proved an exception to the rule. They gave higher ratings to writing articles for professional

enhancement than did most other respondents—and far higher than their male colleagues. It may be that these women see writing as a major contributor to professional advancement, as contrasted with males, who may be able to participate in a wider range of professional activities, such as administration and research, which, along with writing prowess are considered in decisions about promotion and tenure.

Media Theory and Reading

The theoretical underpinnings of the thesis dealt with the media theory called "uses and gratifications." This theory was developed as a reaction to the early hypodermic needle theory of media effects, which saw audiences as passive victims, incapable of resisting powerful media messages. In contrast, uses-and-gratifications theory assumes that media consumers choose freely and intentionally which forms of media to attend to. Furthermore, users desire certain gratifications from media, and vary their involvement depending on whether these expectations are met. Previous studies had generally focused on television and newspapers, and few researchers had tried to apply uses-and-gratifications theory to magazines, particularly professional journals.

The survey used a modified list of standardized questions that measure people's motives for using media, and the gratifications they obtain

from these uses. People filling out the survey were asked to rate on a scale of 0 to 5 (with 5 being the highest score), whether they read professional journals for any of 17 reasons. The choices were as follows:

- To gain information about what is going on in education
- To solve specific problems
- To identify with other teachers and education personnel
- To improve the quality of my teaching

Percent of Survey Respondents at Various Levels Who Received the JOURNAL

Elementary/junior academy	87 percent
Academy	75 percent
College/university	49 percent
Other (supervisors, etc.)	77 percent

How Interesting Do You Find the JOURNAL?

Response	Recipients of JAE	Nonrecipients
Very interesting	18.5 percent	18.8 percent
Somewhat interesting	67.8	53.1
Not very interesting	9.9	18.8
Not interesting at all	3.8	9.3

What Do You Think About the JOURNAL's Graphics and Layout?

Response	Percent
Excellent	17.1 percent
Good	64.3
Fair	17.1
Poor	1.5

How Readable Is THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION?

Response	Recipients of JAE	Nonrecipients
Very readable	29.4 percent	22.6 percent
Quite readable	65.1	61.3
Not very readable	5.1	16.1
Very difficult to read	0.4	0.0

How Much Information Do You Get From the JOURNAL?

Response	Recipients of JAE	Nonrecipients
A lot of useful information	12.4 percent	10.0 percent
Some useful information	65.7	46.7
Only a little useful information	20.6	40.0
No useful information	1.3	3.3

- To read about recent research
- To find issues affecting people like myself
 - To get information to share with other people
 - To learn about important events and people in the field of education
 - To find products through advertising
 - For enjoyment
 - Because I heard other people discussing a particular article
 - Because I had nothing better to do at the time
 - To find out how other teachers have solved problems
 - To learn about something I didn't know about before
 - To aid in classroom planning
 - To find out what issues are currently important in education
 - For professional upgrading
 - Other (please specify)

Ten of these motivations received a median score of at least 3.0 out of 5, and all but two had average scores of at least 2.3, ample indication that these are indeed important reasons why Adventist educators read professional journals. Educators were most likely to read to improve their teaching skills, to obtain information, and for professional upgrading. They were least likely to read because they had nothing to do, because they heard others discussing an article, or to find products through advertising.

The survey thus revealed that people read professional journals for the same reasons they use other media—personal identity, social contact, diversion, and information.

Contrasts Between Men and Women

Analysis of motivations for reading produced some surprising differences between men and women. Reading to aid in classroom planning was a much more important motivation for women with less than a doctoral degree, and for women in secondary and higher education than for their male colleagues.

Women in secondary and higher education rated improving the quality of their teaching as a much more important reason for reading than did men at the same levels. Women in all school settings also rated “To identify with other teachers and education personnel” much more highly

ers (grades 9-10) were an anomaly. They did not consistently match either secondary or elementary educators. Perhaps this is because they teach secondary subjects but associate with elementary teachers every day.

Although they rated the JOURNAL about

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than did males.

Men considered only three motivations as more important than women did: “To get information to share with other people,” “To read about recent research,” and “To learn about important events and people in the field of education,” although on the last two, men and women were separated by only 2 to 6 percentage points.

Men in secondary and higher education were much less likely to read “To gain information about what is going on in education” and men at all levels rated “To find out how other teachers have solved problems” as a less important reason to read than women did.

Junior Academy Teachers

Attitudes of the junior academy teach-

the same as the general survey population, these teachers were more eager to read articles by administrators, college professors, and researchers than were their K-8 colleagues. The junior academy teachers showed less enthusiasm, however, about professional-enrichment activities than did educators at other levels. The only exceptions were visiting other teachers' classrooms, where junior academy teachers were only slightly below the average, and writing articles, where their average score was considerably lower than that of other respondents.

The reading habits of these ninth- and tenth-grade teachers did not consistently align with their elementary or secondary colleagues, either. They had read about the same number of hours in the past week

as the academy teachers. But they more closely resembled elementary teachers in reporting whether they had read a professional journal in the past month.

Junior academy teachers listed the same reasons for not reading as the rest of those surveyed, although far fewer of them cited “too technical” as a reason for avoiding professional journals and books. On motivations for reading, they scored below the average on every item except one, “for enjoyment.” However, their scores showed greater standard deviations than those of single grade, multigrade, or secondary teachers on 27 of 51 comparisons, which tends to reinforce assumptions about the schizophrenic nature of the job.

Agenda Setting

The survey also sought to determine whether the JOURNAL served an agenda-setting function for its readers. Agenda setting has been studied mostly in the context of political campaigns, when media analysts try to determine whether the issues covered by TV and other media are those that the public considers important to an election.

To determine whether the JOURNAL shaped readers’ thinking, survey recipients were asked which issues in education they had been thinking about in the past year or two. Included in the list were a number of topics that the JOURNAL had covered in that time.

Responses from recipients and nonrecipients were compared to see whether people who read the JOURNAL regularly were more likely to have been thinking about recent JOURNAL topics.

If the JOURNAL devoted an entire issue to a topic like dyslexia or service and outreach, recipients were about 10 to 20 percent more likely to have thought about this topic than nonrecipients. However, the JOURNAL was less successful in agenda setting when it printed only one article on a subject. Many of the scores on these topics differed by less than 5 percent.

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Of course, it is risky to conclude that everyone thinks about a topic for the same reasons. This was graphically shown by the shocking number of both recipients and nonrecipients who said they had been thinking about burnout. Whether or not the JOURNAL served as a catalyst, more than half of those who had been in education for 10 years or more said they had recently thought about burnout.

Recommendations for the Future

The low level of professional reading by Adventist educators should be a source of concern to administrators and constituents. Superintendents and principals need to find ways to encourage teachers to read more widely. If teachers do not know about new methods and ideas, they will not be able to share them or put them to work in the classroom. And students cannot be expected to read widely if teachers do not model good reading habits.

Research should be made available in a palatable form to busy educators, and in-service presenters should provide take-home materials for teachers to read. They should also make fervent appeals for teachers to do additional reading on their own.

To get teachers to write, administrators might provide release time, offer cash or other incentives, or allow credit toward recertification for published articles.

Here are some recommendations, based on successful approaches used by other school systems to get teachers to do more professional reading:

1. School administrators should set up professional libraries in each school, and reading committees should select materials to be placed in teachers’ lounges and libraries.

2. Supervisors and principals should provide a bulletin update or news sheet that comments on and recommends recent research and helpful articles.

3. Teachers should be asked to make presentations at faculty meetings and in-services based on their recent reading.

4. Teacher educators and administrators should frequently remind students and teachers of the value of professional reading to success in the classroom. Administrators should provide teachers with helpful journals and summaries of current research.

5. Schools should schedule regular reading breaks when other school activities cease, and everyone—students, administrators, and teachers—reads for a set time without interruption.

6. College and university professors, as well as other educators, need to be encouraged to share their experience and research in journals that teachers will read.

Planning for Upcoming Issues

The preferred topics have already been used as guidelines for assigning articles and scheduling special issues. Some write-in responses highlighted the difficulty of trying to reach the JOURNAL’s diverse audience of kindergarten through university professors. Vigorous, ongoing dialogue can make the JOURNAL more helpful to readers. We like to hear from our readers—so write a letter to the editor or a brief article on a topic of concern. ✍

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