

Pedagogical Application of the Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education

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The impetus for this paper is an article that appeared in the September 1999 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. The title of that article, written by Todd Oppenheimer, is “Schooling the Imagination.” Oppenheimer describes a particular school system that educates not only the mind to think, but also one that treats the body and the soul as an integrated whole. This system, called the Waldorf Schools, is based on the philosophy of its founder, Rudolf Steiner. Steiner, a philosopher and scientist born in Austria in 1861, called his theory “anthroposophy,” which is a belief “about the evolution of human consciousness drawn from a multiplicity of disciplines—anthropology, philosophy, psychology, science, and various religions, particularly Christianity” (Oppenheimer, 1999, p. 30). In the Waldorf Schools, every act, every piece of curriculum, every discussion of every aspect of life is tied back to the basic philosophy. In the Waldorf Schools, the philosophy drives the pedagogy, and the Waldorf teacher practices the philosophy, down to a level of incredibly minute detail. Today, the Waldorf school system is the “largest and fastest growing non-sectarian educational movement in the world” (Kotzsch, 1989, p. 2).

As I read the article, I was filled with competing emotions. On the one hand, I was impressed by the description of an educational system that practiced the harmonious development of the physical, mental, and spiritual powers of every student. On the other hand, I was distressed by the fact that while there is much concern about the “soul” in the Steiner Schools, there is no perceived need for a “savior.” It was almost as though Steiner had formulated a system of education that was based on the fundamental definition of Seventh-day Adventist education, but without the fun-

damental reason why Seventh-day Adventist schools were created—to introduce students to Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, we have had—for about a century—a stated philosophy of education. We have euphemistically called this philosophy “True Education,” and many, if not most of us can recite from memory the definition of true education found on page 13 of the book *Education* by Ellen White (1903). But there is more to True Education than a definition. There is an entire philosophy of teaching and learning that comes with it. And that is where my thoughts intersected with the article by Oppenheimer. The reason that Oppenheimer’s article appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* is simple: Education is a higher social priority these days than it has been in many years, perhaps higher than it has ever been. A school system that is different, that is based on a system of beliefs, and that results in a better-than-average product is news. Why, I asked myself, as I read Oppenheimer, is not such an article being written about Seventh-day Adventist schools?

Is our philosophy faulty or in some way so old-fashioned that it no longer has currency? Or is it possible that what we are presently promulgating as Seventh-day Adventist Education lacks the essence of its soul to a point where it is simply accepted as an alternative, and a good one, but not a distinctive one. I believe that as Seventh-day Adventist educators, we do not practice our stated philosophy as consistently and purposefully as the Waldorf Schools are reported to practice theirs. It is not my point here to compare the two systems, but to ask why one system is noticed and the other is not.

The only philosophy of education we have as Seventh-day Adventists is that which is based on the principles originally presented by Ellen White. We have no other philosophy upon which to base Seventh-day Adventist education. We could develop such a philosophy, but we have not. And what would be the purpose of doing so unless there could be found some inherent weakness with the philosophy that we already have?

I intend in the following sections of this paper to explore possible reasons why the Seventh-day Adventist educational system has not drawn as wide-spread attention as it might, given the incredible quality of the philosophy upon which it is allegedly based.

The Mismatch Between Philosophy and Pedagogy

As a young teacher in the educational system of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, I realized that the educational experience that I had enjoyed and appreciated so much was not common practice. Because of that observation, I was faced with a dilemma. I could rationalize that observed common practice was appropriate and ignore the obvious mismatch between practice and ideology, or I could accept the mismatch as an inadvertent reality, try to understand it, and work to reduce it. For better or for worse, I chose the latter. That is the primary reason why I am here today.

I begin by making a general point about the need to have our practice exemplify our philosophy and for our philosophy to be grounded in our theology (Tucker, 1998).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is, after all, based on a particular theology that is laid out in a system of beliefs. If the Church is to constitute a system of education, then it stands to reason that everything about the nature of that system, including the manner of teaching, would exemplify the Church's basic theological tenets. All methods should embody redemption, reliance on the Word of God in both the written form and the created form, and preparation for the future that faith in that Word projects. In fact, the traditional educational literature of the Seventh-day Adventist Church does just that in publications by E.G. White, including but not limited to *Education*, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, and *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*. And numerous classic Seventh-day Adventist authors on the subject have developed these concepts in harmony with the theological foundations of the church. Authors such as A. T. Jones (undated, reprinted 1983), E. A. Sutherland (1915), L. A. Hansen (1968), R. S. Moore (1976), and Maurice Hodgen (1978) provided editorial views of the Seventh-day Adventist educational traditions, and often decried the lack of fundamental adherence to what became known as the "The Blueprint."

I believe that there are significant inconsistencies between Seventh-day Adventist stated philosophy and the actual practice. What follows is a discussion of several examples of what I perceive to be a mis-

match between “the talk and the walk.” In this discussion it is not my intent or my belief to cast aspersions on any Seventh-day Adventist educator, past or present. I believe that the Church’s failure to develop pedagogy consistent with its theology has been by default rather than by design.

The number and types of mismatch vary depending on the level of detail, but for this discussion, I briefly address the following examples:

- Natural vs. artificial curriculum
- Inclusion vs. exclusion
- Environmental stewardship vs. exploitation

Natural vs. Artificial Curriculum

We are called Seventh-day Adventists. The defining term in that name refers directly to a fundamental belief in the Seventh-day Sabbath. We believe that the Sabbath is celebrated as a constant reminder that Jesus is the Creator and that we are His creatures. This belief begs more than a passing nod to a set of specific pedagogical and curricular principles (Tucker, 1994). There has never been a better example of effective learning than the one that the Creator originally provided (White, 1903). His model incorporated transformational learning that consisted of an integrated thematic curriculum and effective pedagogy, which included mastery teaching, cooperative learning, direct instruction, and authentic assessment of continuous progress.

According to Seventh-day Adventist tradition, the first educational system was and still is called “The Eden School” (White, 1903). This system “was to be a model for man throughout all aftertime. The Garden of Eden was the schoolroom, nature was the lesson book, the Creator Himself was the instructor, and the parents of the human family were the students” (p. 20).

Since God is the source of all true knowledge, it is, as we have seen, the first object of education to direct our minds to His own revelation of Himself. Adam and Eve received knowledge through His works. (p. 16)

Upon every page of the great volume of His created works may still be traced His handwriting. Nature still speaks of her Creator. Yet

these revelations are partial and imperfect. And in our fallen state, with weakened powers and restricted vision, we are incapable of interpreting aright. We need the fuller revelation of Himself that God has given in His written word. The Holy Scriptures are the perfect standard of truth, and as such should be given the highest place in education. (p. 17)

Although the earth was blighted with the curse, nature was still to be man's lesson book. (p. 27)

Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do. . . . It is the work of true education to develop this power; to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thought. Instead of confining their study to that which men have said or written, let students be directed to the sources of truth, to the vast fields opened for research in nature and revelation. Let them contemplate the great facts of duty and destiny, and the mind will expand and strengthen. (p. 17)

Notice the way in which the learning described by those statements is infused within a coalescence of all aspects of reality. In the Eden School, everything was integrated. Today we would call such a system "holistic"—a system where all aspects of the curriculum are infused within all other aspects.

Contrast that system with the fractured curricula of our time. We study "subjects" as though they are distinct entities separated in time and space from all other subjects. Such separatism is not consistent with the natural order that was given to us in the beginning. Even the theological aspects of our curriculum have been isolated from other aspects. We have Bible classes instead of infusing the written Word into all aspects of study.

We can argue that this practice is at least akin to dualism. For example, at the risk of expressing pedagogical heresy, the idea of integrating faith and learning is an insidious barrier to the implementation of an education consistent with Seventh-day Adventist theology. Let me explain with a current example. In the evolution/creation debate, one of the positions being used to defend the creation argument is the fact that because

there is irreducible complexity in the design of nature that cannot be explained by any evolutionary argument, there must be a designer. The resulting tendency in this debate has been to depersonalize God into a designer force and thus satisfy the need for God, but not deal with the personal need for a savior.

The study of design is science and art; the study of salvation is faith, but the two are still not joined together until you bring a personal being (Jesus) into the picture as both the Designer and the Savior—the Creator and Redeemer. He is the “author [designer and creator] and finisher [redeemer and savior] of our *faith*” (Hebrews 12:2). In school, we persist in treating disciplines as separate and, therefore, distinct, non-integrated entities. The holistic realities of God as both the Designer and the Sustainer are rarely addressed. We know that intuitively, so we *talk* about the integration of faith and learning, but then we persist in keeping them apart by talking about how we need to put them together. In fact, they have never been apart except as artificially separated in our traditions.

We study the flower (science). We study the life of Jesus (religion—Bible class). But Jesus said, “I am the lily of the valley and the rose of Sharon.” We study seeds (science). We study the Word of God (religion—Bible class). Jesus said, “The seed is the Word of God” (Luke 8:12). And the “Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). So the seed is metaphorically Christ as well. But then if we take that idea too far—through depersonalization, we end up believing that the whole of creation (even if we call it the design force) is God—pantheism.

Neither the flower nor the seed *is* God, but it is an extension of God’s creative force in the same sense that we often describe a work of art (music, sculpture, painting, literature) as being the artist—for example, we might say, “That is pure Mozart.” Where we religionists are most insidious in our separation of faith and learning is the tenacity with which we translate faith into structures to be learned, memorized, and recited in isolation—first the books of the Bible in order, then proof-texts, and finally 27 fundamental beliefs. Baptism becomes the avowal of faith through recitation of belief *statements* rather than a “death, burial, and resurrection” relationship with our Lord.

That being only an example of the integrated nature of the education that God intended and modeled in Eden, I believe that we have an obligation to put into place the most effective instructional techniques that exist and to make sure that each one is in harmony with the principles of our philosophy.

Recommendation: The educational leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church can begin immediately to promote a curriculum based on the principles of the Eden School. Secular research abounds as to effective models and innovations that achieve results, virtually all of which supports traditional Seventh-day Adventist methods and strategies which have stood the test of time and which can be implemented to demonstrate the validity of “The Blueprint.”

Inclusion vs. Exclusion

Traditionally, parents who want to enroll their children with disabilities in Seventh-day Adventist schools are told, “We have nothing for your child. The public schools are set up to provide special education.” And thus we deny a Christian education to the very individuals for whom Jesus said, “But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind” (Luke 14:13). “And the king will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’ . . . Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these you did not do it to me’” (Matthew 25:45). Can we honestly claim that these words of the Master Teacher are only metaphorical and don’t apply to the reality of our schools? The Seventh-day Adventist program of Christian education has disenfranchised growing numbers of Seventh-day Adventist parents. Many of these parents have been forced to seek such other educational alternatives as public school, other Christian schools, and home-schooling. While there are glowing examples of church schools where special services are available, it seems that we need to reaffirm what Christian education is all about—especially as it relates to students with disabilities. Christian schools that refuse to admit students with disabilities are denying a basic tenet of Christian faith: “Inasmuch as ye did it

not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me” (Matthew 25:45).

Three reasons are usually given for not providing special education for students with disabilities in Seventh-day Adventist schools:

1. The cost is prohibitive.
2. Educating students with disabilities detracts from the needs of the other students.
3. Teachers aren't trained to handle the special needs of students with disabilities.

Let's consider each of these three reasons briefly.

Cost: There is a cost to any service. But for a Christian educational system to hold that the cost of providing a Christian education is acceptable for “normal” students but is prohibitive for a child who is deaf, blind, or has a physical disability is discrimination that borders on sacrilege. Such discrimination is illegal in the secular world! We can afford whatever we want. In the very rare cases where the cost to meet a particular need is prohibitive, the church-school community can take advantage of already established specific measures to cover such costs without denying a child the right to as normal a life as is possible. These measures may include a partnership with public-school services for students with disabilities, but it would not necessitate denial of a Christian education.

Values: The idea that some students might be educated at the expense of others is a traditional educational view that is based on a number of unfounded assumptions (Hacker, 1995). I have seen many examples throughout North America and Europe that demonstrate that all students, including many if not most students with disabilities, can receive a better education in an inclusive setting. But a very real set of conditions is present in every one of these cases:

1. Teachers are trained to teach to the special needs of *every* student, including those with disabilities, and
2. Sufficient supports are provided to assist the teachers in meeting the special needs of *every* student.

Training: To meet the challenge of providing for the needs of *every* student in Seventh-day Adventist schools is a Christian imperative. But to do so requires a different kind of teacher-training and more-

comprehensive community support on the part of the Church.

Recommendation: In order for teachers to provide for the special educational needs of students, pre-service training of all teachers must include the following:

1. Training of pre-service teachers in teaching models and learning strategies that provide teachers with skills in classroom management and methods that meet the full range of instructional needs in a class that includes students with disabilities.

2. Training of teachers, administrators, and church leaders in setting up and conducting child-study teams, which are necessary to provide the community support essential for meeting the needs of all students, including those with disabilities.

3. Establishing a new collaboration between educators, parents, and the larger church community that provides for the needs as they arise.

Many of us understand—some of us from personal experience—the frustration and even anger that we feel when our own system of Christian education fails to provide for our students because of some characteristic over which the child has no control. We must bring back the philosophy of Christian service that Jesus described: “Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind” (Luke 14:21).

Before I leave this subject, let me extend it somewhat. In some areas of the World Church, we have also systematically denied educational services to the poor (those who can’t pay tuition), to non-native-language speakers, and to those with “behavior problems.” We are only now beginning to realize the mistakes that we have made in this respect. There is no legitimate reason for a school allegedly established on biblical principles to avoid its responsibility to *all* students.

It would be inappropriate to leave the impression that there are no Christian schools that provide for the special needs of students with disabilities. I am personally aware of Christian schools that provide exemplary services for students with disabilities. Most notably perhaps are those operated by the Hutterite Brethren and by the Mennonite Church. As director of the Bureau of Special Education for the state of Pennsylvania, it was my pleasure to work with some of those parochial schools to de-

velop appropriate educational support for students with disabilities. But in each of those instances, the commitment to provide a Christian education for even the most difficult to serve was a commitment of the whole church. There was a conscious decision, followed by supportive action, on the part of the entire church community to do whatever it takes to support every student who needs a Christian education. That meant providing support even for those students who had serious behavior and emotional problems. A wonderful example of how that was done in one instance is provided in a vignette by Liv Fonnebo (1996), who is the principal of the northernmost Seventh-day Adventist church school in the world. Incidentally, the Ekrehaggen School in Tromso, Norway, has become a beacon on the hill of world geography. That school has been featured by the media, talked about on the streets, and has become the place to go to school in North Norway.

Jesus didn't stop with the simple invitation of Luke 14:21; His imperative has specific urgency. He commanded His servants to "compel them to come in" (verse 23). Given those words, how can we afford to deny any student an education that feeds the soul as well as the mind. We have no excuse for not providing an appropriate Christian education for our children, including those with disabilities. Christian schools, above all others, should be known for their support of *all* students. When a teacher individualizes learning to every child's ability level and style of learning, then there are no disabilities—just gifts, talents, "smarts," to be nurtured and developed to their fullest. That is our challenge as Christian Educators.

Environmental Stewardship vs. Exploitation

As I was putting this paper together, I happened upon an Internet conversation with Brian Faehner who is attending the University of Maryland. Brian is a product of Seventh-day Adventist education, and he continues to make us proud as he helps to stir up the global conscience relative to the extremely vulnerable condition of our planet. We recently asked Brian what he thought about the possibility of an environmental theology that would be consistent with Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. His response poured forth with untamed energy and insight. I have copied a portion of it here.

Care of Creation. God is the ultimate environmentalist. He created the beauty, which we're screwing up. Among others, you might want to examine the following three areas:

1. Biodiversity: Includes tropical-rainforest protection, and the plants, which are being used for hi-tech cancer research, etc. Biodiversity also includes endangered species. Why do you think we have the animals we do today? Noah had an ark. If God cared enough to make an ark for the protection of animals and humans, why should we not protect those same species and preserve critical habitats? Protecting endangered species is one of the easiest issues for the general public to understand and support. It sometimes sounds wishy-washy, but protecting endangered species means much more because of the ecological web that exists. It means that by protecting wolves there is enough wilderness to then support numerous other species.

2. Environmental justice: Includes exposure of toxins and harmful gases to some people and not others. Exposure to toxins and the resulting physical deformities (and thus medical problems) is much more present in low-income neighborhoods with little civic organization. This also could include air pollution overall. Coal-power plants of Appalachia pour sulfur dioxide into the air, which is blown into New England. The result is not only acid rain, which creates acid lakes and kills aquatic lifeforms, but also an increase in asthmatic and upper respiratory problems in humans. Two-thirds of the rivers in the United States are unclean to fish and swim in according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

3. Sustainable development: Includes meeting the needs of the present without limiting the ability of future generations. The three-Rs: Reduce, reuse, and recycle. Being proactive relative to the environment on campus means that people like me might want to go to school there and also teaches students civic responsibilities by confronting the school's impact on environmental issues.

In my eventual struggle thus far I've found that often Christians, and especially Adventists, are not too worried about the state of the environment because Jesus is coming. With so much evil everywhere, why should we care? We should spend our time reading the Bible, not recycling. In one word: *apathy*. So the challenge is getting Christians to feel

that this planet *does* matter, that the blueprint of God is still vivid and definitely recognizable. (Faehner, 2001)

These inspiring words from Brian Faehner are, I believe, in harmony with Seventh-day Adventist theology as it relates to salvation and redemption. God loved the world so much that He gave His life for it. It is ethnocentric to assume that God loved only the people in the world, and that we are free to exploit the rest of creation as we see fit. It is undoubtedly important that the word given in John 3:16 from which we get “world” is *kosmos*, including all things animate and inanimate on our home planet. While salvation is limited to those who believe, God’s love is not. He loves the whole of the Earth, and He left mankind with orders to tend and keep it. What has been our response to that charge, and how do we relate to our stewardship responsibility in the curricula of our schools?

Recommendation: The educational leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church can immediately sponsor on-campus and church-wide focus-groups to design action plans for responsible stewardship of the planet that God so loved that He gave His only begotten Son to save it (John 3:16).

We’ve looked at three dichotomies: Natural vs. artificial curriculum, inclusion vs. exclusion, and environmental stewardship vs. exploitation. Certainly more could be discussed. Consider the following dichotomies:

- Reliance on the bell-shaped curve vs. natural diversity and multiple mental gifts
- The emphasis on developing self-esteem vs. an others-directed lifestyle: Maslow’s humanistic hierarchy vs. “Peter’s ladder” (2 Peter 1:5-7)
- Norm-referenced standards vs. authentic (curriculum-based) assessment
- Graded vs. ungraded pedagogical organization
- Lock-step progress vs. continuous progress
- Dependence upon textbooks vs. using authentic contextual materials.

But more discussion of the dichotomies is not necessary to support the point I want to make. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a sound

theology. We have, by the grace of God, received guidance in the development of a philosophy of education that is solidly established on that theology. The history of our church and the history of our educational development are replete with indicators of a struggle to bring our educational practice into harmony with our beliefs. We still struggle against the tendency to “go with the flow,” and, as a result, we have established ourselves among the best of the mediocre when we have the possibility of being the best of the best for the glory of our Creator. Instead, it seems that we have sold ourselves short and become satisfied to brag about the fact that the Seventh-day Adventist educational system is the largest Protestant parochial system in the world. So what! How does that glorify God?

God will be glorified when we establish an educational system based on the essence of True Education. I believe that the essence of Seventh-day Adventist Education, as portrayed in our historical writings, can be summarized as follows:

- The Focus is on Christ, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of life.
- The Curriculum is service-oriented, integrated, and thematic.
- The Goal is forever-learning.

Not another educational system in the world has those characteristics. How well they fit our system can be the basis for a form of program development and evaluation that we have not yet seen.

Conclusion

When Dr. K. M. Kennedy encouraged me to change my major from theology to education more than 40 years ago, I was challenged to seek for myself the evidence that “The Blueprint” was as solid an educational foundation as could be found. I set out to do that.

The search is not and will never be completed. Along the way I discovered that learning is an eternal journey with life-and-death consequences. I believe that I have covered enough ground to state unequivocally that there has not been a theory of instruction or system of pedagogy

presented to date that has more formal scholarly support than do the principles presented in the system we have called True Education.

But the question that I have been asking myself as an educator for more than four decades is this: With a philosophy that is so sound, so right, and so harmonious with every principle of our fundamental beliefs, why don't we practice what we preach? Either the system of education that we hold dear is driven by the principles of True Education—or it is not. Today I stand before you and say that I believe that it is not. Please don't misunderstand me here. My statement is not an accusation of any leader, any individual, or any organizational action. It is perhaps only an indication of the inertia that occurs when growth stops. For reasons that are buried in history, we stopped developing our practice to match our philosophy. Today, too many of our schools are little more than secular schools with Bible classes.

When I was young, I was filled with all of the usual ambitions of childhood, including grand ideas and even grander plans of what I was going to do in the future. But perhaps I was a bit more vocal about these plans than normal, because my father would often respond to a particularly pretentious description of my intentions with what was for me at the time an irritating challenge: "Do it; then talk about it!" Today, with thanks to my father—and a nod to Nike—I propose another version of that often-repeated phrase: "Just do it! Others will talk about it."

As a boy growing up Adventist in a series of Adventist communities, complete with Adventist institutions and Adventist schools, I was never far from fervent pronouncements about the values and benefits that we Adventists had been given. So it isn't surprising that I assumed that the practices of Adventism were the exemplification of the philosophy that drove us to such fervor. My naive assumption was that whatever Adventists did was better in every way than what non-Adventists did, because we were Adventists and we had the Present Truth. Given that context, it was quite a surprise to me, as I began studying the literature upon which the Present Truth was based, to discover that Adventist cultural behavior and Adventist oral traditions were in some areas two different things. This was certainly true in my chosen field of education. In general, we weren't doing it, but we were talking about it. Notice that I said "in general."

Today, and every day, I give thanks to my Lord, Jesus Christ, for having granted me the benefits of parenting and schooling that so closely adhered to the principles and concepts that I believe exemplify the Seventh-day Adventist Present Truth. It was my good fortune to be blessed with wise parents. In this case, I am referring to the wisdom that the “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of. . .” (Psalm 111:10).

My mother, under the tutelage of Mrs. Arthur Spaulding, learned to present the Word of God to her preschoolers in a way that was exciting and inspiring. My first teacher in church school, Mrs. Robert Eldridge, was as close an example as I have seen of what I now believe to be the essence of Seventh-day Adventist teaching. My secondary experience at Little Creek Academy, under the direction of the Straw family, was, for all practical purposes, as close to the mark as I can imagine. I had the incredible benefit of having my Bible class taught by W. E. Straw, one of the pioneers of Adventist education. And for the practical arts as well as the fine arts, it was my privilege to learn from “Prof,” or Leland Straw and his wife, Alice, the two pioneers who were called to establish that school in the rolling hills of East Tennessee. They did it and I am talking about it, as thousands of others have been doing for fifty years or so.

The planet is ripe for a demonstration of excellence. If we will just do it, everyone will be talking about it, and the philosophy of Seventh-day Adventist education will point people to a service-oriented form of Christian living that will ring out from every mountaintop of social discourse in the world.

That kind of recognition cannot be achieved by a savvy public-relations department. The results of true education will speak for themselves. Until they do, we aren’t practicing what we preach.

May God grant us the wisdom and the resolve to present Jesus Christ, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer in a way that the world has never before seen—through a place called the Eden School, the Seventh-day Adventist school.

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