

Warmth: The Missing Ingredient In Adventist Schools

BY GAIL TAYLOR RICE

Mr. Buhler,¹ the history teacher at Valley Vista Academy for the past 40 years, was looking forward to Homecoming Week and seeing members of the class of 1982. This would be their 10-year reunion and most had not been back to the academy since graduation. The class had been one of his favorites. Mr. Buhler wondered where they all were now. They had shown much leadership potential as academy students. Surely they had gone on to great things. The weekend, however, turned out to be a real disappointment! Very few of the students attended. In fact, many members of the class of 1982 had stopped attending church and felt very little attachment to the Adventist school that had been such a big part of their lives as young people.

"Where did we go wrong?" the teachers asked one another at faculty worship the following week. "Why are so many of our youth losing their commitment to the church and the schools and even to Christianity?" If Mr. Buhler and the other teachers had spoken with the missing members of the class of 1982, they might have discovered that most of the youth who stop attending church do not leave because they no longer believe the church's doctrines. Rather, they leave because they never felt really accepted, loved, or needed.

Valuegenesis Findings About Warmth in Adventist Churches and Schools

A recent study of Adventist education underscores the importance to young people of a caring school environment. It is leading concerned par-

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ents, teachers, and administrators to seriously consider issues of warmth, belonging, and acceptance in our schools.

Valuegenesis researchers collected data from nearly 12,000 Adventist young people attending sixth through twelfth grades in Adventist schools in the United States and Canada. Approximately 2,600 additional questionnaires were filled out by pastors, school administrators, teachers, and parents. The respondents answered more than 400 questions about their beliefs, commitment to the SDA Church, life-style preferences, and perceptions about their church, school, and family life.

The research team's² publications provide generally encouraging news about Adventist youth, their homes, churches, and schools. Using consultants who have been involved in the study of youth in American churches for

many years, this team of researchers discovered, for example, that Adventist youth have higher levels of faith maturity and denominational loyalty than the young people in five of the major Protestant denominations.³

The researchers sought to determine which environmental elements seem to accompany high faith maturity and denominational loyalty. Statistical correlations resulted in the identification of 41 "effectiveness factors" that predicted mature Christian faith and denominational loyalty. A significant number of these home, church, and school factors are closely associated with belonging, warmth, concern, and support. Table 1 shows the nine factors in the school environment that positively correlated with Christian maturity and denominational loyalty.

Table 1

School Effectiveness Factors:
Items That Positively Correlated
With Youth Faith Maturity
And/or Denominational Loyalty

1. Religious program is perceived by students to be of high quality.
2. Students frequently talk to teachers at school about God and their faith.
3. Teachers are competent.
4. Teachers are caring and supportive.
5. School spirit is high.
6. Discipline is perceived to be fair.
7. Students have a voice in school policy.
8. Teachers refrain from "putting down" students.
9. School enforces standards important to Adventism (such as Sabbath observance and temperance practices).

Further analysis sought to identify whether these effectiveness factors were present in the respondents' environments. Of the 41 important environmental items that correlated with positive faith and commitment to the church, some were present to a much higher degree than others.

One of the six dominant elements considered to be missing in many Adventist young people's lives was the experience of warmth and support.⁴ Elements of acceptance, caring, and belonging were noticeably absent in the perceptions of a majority of young Adventists.

It is possible that youth in Adventist schools and churches have higher expectations for warmth in their communities than do youth in other organizations. One academy junior said, "I spent my first two years in a public high school. Kids who have gone to private schools all of their life have no idea what a cold environment exists out there. I do not find the atmosphere cold here at the academy at all." Whether or not expectations are accurate, the perceptions dif-

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fer markedly. When asked about church environment, only 39 percent of the Adventist youth said their churches were warm, as compared to 60 to 71 percent of the other church groups surveyed.

Not only do Adventist youth feel generally little concern from their sig-

nificant adults in the church, they seem to perceive little warmth from their friends, as well. Only 35 percent of the SDA youth agreed that their peers cared about them. Youth in five mainline Protestant denominations averaged 39 percent agreement; 54 percent of the Southern Baptist youth believed that "other youth in the church care about me."

Warmth in Adventist Schools

Are Adventist schools perceived as being warmer than our churches? Valuegenesis research suggests that they are not.

- Only one Adventist school in four (25 percent) had "caring teachers."⁵
- Fewer than that (only 19 percent) could boast that teachers consistently refrained from "putting down" students, according to student perceptions.⁶
- Only 21 percent of the Adventist schools met suggested criteria for teacher involvement with students.⁷

This means that "students see most teachers in Adventist schools as uncaring, uninvolved, and ready to put stu-

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dents down.”⁸ Why does the perception exist? Mr. Buhler and his colleagues at Valley Vista Academy—as well as many other Adventist teachers—would say that they are tireless in the care and love they give their students. They would point to the countless hours spent outside of the classroom sponsoring activities at the school gym. They could cite many missed family activities while they fulfill their extracurricular responsibilities. They put in many hours of student supervision that extend far beyond teaching and grading papers. How could it be that so many students don’t feel particularly loved in their schools?

How Students View the Lack of Warmth

Valuegenesis researchers have gone to Adventist schools and churches around the United States and talked to hundreds of young people. We have asked them, Why is it that you don’t feel warmth in your school? The answers to that question raise some concerns, but also give rise to simple ideas with potential to make some big differences in young people’s experiences in Adventist schools.⁹ The following three responses are typical of what Adventist youth say when asked about problems in school

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climate. Chris said:

No one can convince me that my teachers care about me, particularly my biology teacher. He turned in a D as my midterm grade, because he had misplaced a couple of my assignments. By the time the midterms were due, I had redone the missing assignments and turned them in with a verification that these had been completed and turned in at the original due date. When I went to the teacher the day the midterms were issued to ask him to clear the D with the office, he refused. He made it clear that he would not take the time to refigure my grade or send a note to the office to clear my deficiency. He had something else he wanted to do—something that he figured was more important, even though he knew that if it was not cleared

with the office that day, I would have to miss two basketball games over the weekend. As a result, I let my team down and I was embarrassed to have to sit on the bench in front of all of my friends. Don’t try to tell me that the teachers in this school care about me.

Many of the students we talked to felt particularly upset about standards issues. In fact, it seems that lack of caring or “putting down” of students occurs in interactions related to dress, hair length, and jewelry more than any other context. Carin explained it this way:

Things have gotten really bad around here lately. It seems that the teachers are more concerned with policing than they are with teaching. Some of the girls have been wearing jewelry to school—nothing too obvious. But teachers stand at the doors of the classrooms and either send them home to take it off, or remove it themselves. One of my friends left school this semester because of an incident where a teacher took off a necklace she was wearing inside her shirt—hardly showing at all—and then he lost it. Her mother, who isn’t an Adventist, was so furious that she transferred her out. I don’t think she’ll ever have a chance to attend another Adventist school.

Monique, a middle-aged woman

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who has not attended church in years, still remembers the stinging humiliation she felt years ago when she was an academy freshman at an Adventist school. Her Bible teacher asked her to return to her dorm room and find a skirt that was more modest. As she walked out of the classroom, he commented to the whole classroom that he had seen prostitutes in longer skirts. She vowed then and there that as soon as she had a choice, she would have nothing to do with a church that made teens feel like that.

Dress Standards and Warmth

The Valuegenesis data reveal that a negative relationship exists between youths' Christian maturity and the schools' enforcement of dress and jewelry standards. That is to say, students who see their school as enforcing standards regarding jewelry and dress show a corresponding reduction in faith maturity and denominational loyalty. They also view their schools as less warm.

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Adventist youth have revealed their belief that the home, not the school, should enforce standards regarding popular culture. *Family* enforcement of jewelry and dress standards correlates positively with faith maturity and denominational loyalty. Enforcement by church or school relates negatively to these two important goals of Adventist education.

It appears there is something about the way standards have been enforced or the standards themselves that has caused problems for youth in Adventist schools. It is probably not the rules. Standards can be upheld with positive results. Examples of this include Disneyland and McDonald's, organizations that have dress codes of "uniform" rules for their employees. For example, they regulate colors of lipstick and size of earrings that their employees can wear while at work.

These organizations' dress rules are not tied in any way to religious standards or a code of ethics.

Dress Code or Uniform Rule?

It appears that when strict dress codes in Adventist schools are enforced as a "uniform" rule, not a statement of

they ever imagined by the way they have enforced school dress codes. When we attack students' characters or motives, they feel "put down," unimportant, and unloved; and when they feel unloved in the Adventist school, they also feel unwanted in the Adventist Church.

It is possible to have both strict dress

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church belief or a test of character, students feel warmth exists in their school and they grow in Christian maturity.

Taking a "uniform" approach to dress standards in an Adventist school is fairly simple. Decide what is allowed, clearly communicate your preferences to the students, and enforce them as a "uniform" issue. An example might be the following: If a student wears shorts to a school function and shorts are prohibited, the teacher or administrator tells the student that the clothes are not appropriate according to the school dress code and requests him to change. Nothing is said about modesty, judgment, or character.

Teachers in Adventist schools have probably done more to hurt young people's chances for developing a love of and commitment to the church than

codes in the Christian school and positive student attitudes, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to do so, unless the faculty is strongly committed to making the important distinction between rules and personal character.

Perhaps because so many teachers and principals have been unable to separate personal character from violations of dress code that Valuegenesis data suggest a second alternative for Adventist schools.

Recommend or Require?

Adventist schools might consider relaxing their dress codes—simply recommending, but not requiring, certain dress standards. This idea is unsettling to most of us. We imagine students coming to school with earrings dangling to their shoulders, wearing short shorts

and heavy make-up. And as a result we foresee a decrease of spiritual tone on campus and and loss of constituency support.

A couple of Adventist academies, however, have recently relaxed school dress requirements with surprisingly positive results. At one school, the students reacted to the new relaxed rules with some fairly outlandish outfits for a few days. Teachers soon found the students searching for principles of appropriate dress. Students asked the teachers why faculty members dressed the way they did. They searched their Bibles and Ellen White's writings for principles and guidelines. Soon the privilege of wearing whatever they wanted was replaced with thoughts such as these: What image do I really want to project? What is really me? What is appropriate and comfortable?

Students found that certain choices made more sense for their life-styles, as well. For example, most students were involved in physical-education classes and after-school sports activities. Jewelry of any kind was a nuisance or forbidden by sports organizations for athletic activities. It turned out that hardly anyone wore jewelry to school at all, even though it was "allowed" now, because it could be lost or stolen when removed for athletic activities.

After just a few weeks of the new relaxed dress standards, teachers reported that students were coming to class dressed more modestly and neatly than they ever had in the past. Parents, initially concerned by the change in school regulations, were also praising the change. They discovered that when their teenagers had more choices at school they were better prepared to make similar decisions when they graduated and were outside the protective atmosphere of the academy.

Adventist schools must look carefully at how they handle questions about dress and personal appearance. They can choose two options if their first priority is to enhance their students' faith maturity and denominational loyalty.

- Relax the dress rules and remove faculty from constant policing, or

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It seems that lack of caring or "putting down" of students occurs in interactions related to dress, hair length, and jewelry more than any other context.

- Make the rules as strict as they wish, but carefully educate everyone that these standards do not all represent biblical principles or character judgments. They are simply standards that reflect the preferred "look" for students when they are at school.

To enhance young people's commitment to the church, we need to give a high priority to increasing perceptions of warmth in the schools. We cannot ignore what the youth are saying about the connection between dress standards and perceptions of warmth.

Suggestions for Increasing Warmth in Adventist Schools

One of the strongest messages from Valuegenesis research is this: If we want to convey love and care for our students, we must analyze what and how we com-

municate in the area of dress and behavior standards. Additional suggestions gleaned from asking elementary and secondary students "When did you feel that a teacher really cared for you in the Adventist school?" include the following:

1. Don't make us feel bad if we break a school rule. It is OK to correct our behavior; just don't make value judgments about us.

2. Take time to be with us. We like it when teachers hang out in the halls between classes. Sometimes it seems that you are very anxious to be away from us. We like it when you seem to have time for us.

3. Get to know us. Ask us about ourselves. Ask about our families, our jobs, our hopes, our fears. Sometimes we feel that no one at school really knows us.

4. Praise us. Look for the good in us. We love it if you tell the class that we got the top score on a test, or if you tell us that the class as a group performed better than any other group you have had in 10 years of teaching this subject. Brag about us all you want. Find ways to tell us that we did something well as often as you can. Some schools have "warm fuzzy weeks." Every kid in the school should get a "warm fuzzy" from every teacher—and not only during that week.

5. Involve us. Invite us to sit on a school committee. Ask us to play a special number for chapel or a program sometime. Help us work up a song. Some of our fondest memories come from the opportunity to perform with a small group—a song, a skit. But it is really hard to figure that out all by ourselves. We love it when a teacher at the school helps organize and put together something like that. And we never forget it.

6. It's OK to give us some physical contact. Many of us are pretty starved for a pat on the back or a simple hug. Even if we look embarrassed, we still like it.

7. Encourage our parents and other adults to become more involved with our school activities. Ask them to assist with organizing events, contributing food, photographing or videotaping

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events, and providing transportation. Most of them are willing, even eager, to be involved and to feel that they are contributing. Many of them would love to have an excuse to spend some time at the school. (Yet teachers and administrators rarely take the time to ask them to help. Often teachers who do not have time to sponsor extra activities try to do this. As a result, they do it poorly, when parents and grandparents and other adults from church would do an excellent job, relieve some of the overworked teachers, and help the students in the process.) Even though we don't say it often, we really like the adults in our lives to see our athletic events, our musical and dramatic performances, our science fairs.

8. Make us feel that we belong, that we are needed, that we would be missed. We need to feel that we are a part of the school family.

Loving Unconditionally

Miriam Schlein has written a delightful children's book entitled, *The Way Mothers Are*.¹⁰ The book describes an extended dialogue between a young kitten and its mother:

"Mother," said the little one, swinging on a tree, "do you love me?"

"Yes, I do," said the mother cat. . . .

"But Mother," said the little one, "why do you love me when sometimes I am naughty and run away when you are trying to dress me?"

"I never said I stopped loving you when you are naughty, did I?" asked his mother, hanging out the clothes."

The kitten keeps trying to figure out why the mother cat loves him. She tells him that she loves him, "even those days when you are very naughty and

The Valuegenesis data reveal that a negative relationship exists between youths' Christian maturity and the schools' enforcement of dress and jewelry standards.

even though I don't really like one single thing you do."

"I love you," she answered, "because you are my little one, my very own child. From the moment you were born I cared for you, and wanted what was best for you. So you don't think I love you just when you are good, and stop loving you when you are naughty, do you? That's not the way mothers are. I love you all the time, because you are mine. . . . Yes," said the mother, giving him a big tight hug, "That's the reason. And it is so simple. But that's the way mothers are."

Youth in Adventist schools need to know that they are loved unconditionally. It is time for teachers and administrators to understand the importance of establishing an atmosphere of acceptance and warmth in the Adventist school. Even when the young people are "naughty," they need to be hugged and affirmed. Teachers do not instruct youth by disapproving looks and dis-

couraging comments. They instruct them by living fulfilled Christian lives and sharing those lives with their students. They instruct them by loving their students because they are theirs.

Students in Adventist schools belong to the school. They belong to the church. They are the future of the church. We must love them because they are ours. And because we love them, they will grow in Christian maturity and loyalty.

How can we warm up our schools? It is just that simple. ☞

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All names and places have been changed to protect anonymity.
2. The Valuegenesis project committee included V. Bailey Gillespie, chairman; C. Thomas Smith; Steve Case; Stuart Tyner; Peter L. Benson; Michael Donahue; Melvin Davis; Roger Dudley; Edwin Hernandez; Jan Kuzma; Marvin Nygaard; Gail Rice; and Won Kil Yoon.
3. The five denominations that were studied included members from the Church of Christ, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Lutherans, and the Disciples of Christ. (Whenever the five are grouped together, they do not include the Southern Baptist Church, which is cited freestanding).
4. Peter L. Benson and Michael J. Donahue, *Valuegenesis Report 1* (Minneapolis: Search Institute Publication, 1990), p. 32.
5. In order to meet criteria for caring teachers, the school needed to have 75 percent or more of the students give teachers positive ratings for listening, caring about students, and rewarding successes.
6. To meet the criteria for avoiding "putting down," 75 percent or more of the students had to report that teachers did not "put down" students.
7. To meet criteria for teacher involvement with students, the average teacher from a school reported frequency of efforts to relate to students outside the classroom.
8. Gail Taylor Rice, "Have You Hugged Your Kids Today?" *Spectrum* 22:2 (May 1992), p. 18.
9. Watch for the series of three books to be published by La Sierra University Press in 1993 entitled *Making a Difference*. These books will each provide 100 practical ideas gleaned from interviews with Adventist young people about improving Adventist homes, schools, and churches.
10. Miriam Schlein, *The Way Mothers Are* (Chicago: Albert Whitman and Company, 1963).