



James C. Davis, Jr.

As an Adventist educator, I find myself frequently referring to the book *Education*. Written in 1903, by Ellen G. White, the book presents a model for Adventist education that is as revolutionary and relevant today as it was well more than 100 years ago.

Reading *Education* can elicit a lot of responses. At times, it is exciting, making us think of what can be and who we are partnering with. At other times, the seriousness of the educator's responsibility can elicit feelings of inadequacy. Sometimes it can be challenging, causing readers to reflect on their professional practices and how they might be adjusted to better serve students and families.

Some passages can lead to confusion. One such passage can be found on page 292. Describing teaching, we read that "this work is the nicest, the most difficult, ever committed to human beings."¹ I have spent quite a bit of time pondering this statement. It can seem contradictory and confusing.

It was less than nice, the time that I sat in an office for 20 minutes while a disgruntled parent yelled at me and accused me of not liking her son because she disagreed with some discipline that had been administered. It was certainly not nice the times that I have met with families to let them know that their child would not be able to return to school due to choices he or she had made. The hours spent in board meetings, staff meetings, and professional-development seminars were not always nice. It was far from nice, working with law enforcement and social workers when it was necessary to report abuse and neglect. Long weekends full of activities with little time to recuperate before returning to school on Monday morning did not seem nice, either.

Being insulted and harassed by parents because their child did not receive the grade they would have liked

The Nicest Work

“Parents and teachers lie down in their last sleep, their lifework seeming to have been wrought in vain; they know not that their faithfulness has unsealed springs of blessing that can never cease to flow; only by faith they see the children they have trained become a benediction and an inspiration to their fellow men, and the influence repeat itself a thousandfold”

[*Education*, 305].

was not high on my list of pleasantness. Days of sickness from interacting with young people with poor hygiene habits, with coughs and runny noses were unpleasant. The list could go on and on.

In my 24 years serving in the roles of classroom teacher, vice-principal, principal, superintendent, in boarding school and day school, there have been many experiences that I would not classify as nice. This could be the reason that the previously quoted sentence includes the caveat, “the most difficult.” We work with people, and people have issues. We bring our own issues with us.

This Is Challenging Work

If we focused solely on these negative, less-than-nice things, it might be hard to find a reason to continue. As easy as it is to be consumed by the negatives, the slights, and the insults, it is essential that we acknowledge the positives. Indeed, we *must* dwell on the positives so that we are

enabled to endure the difficult. When you watch a student struggling with behavioral issues start to mature and gain control after hours of discipline, guidance, redirection, and love—that is nice. Steering a class through a difficult subject, watching the understanding dawn on their faces is nice. Teaching alongside a former student who has chosen teaching as a career is rewarding. Building genuine connections and relationships so that students feel safe coming to you with challenges and seeking advice is positive. Watching your students rise from the water in the baptismal tank, publicly giving their hearts to Christ is exhilarating. Being invited to graduations, weddings, and baby dedications of the students you have worked with is very exciting. Watching an entire family join the Adventist Church after enrolling their children in your school is nice. Seeing your students move through school to become successful in their ca-

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reers is great. Having students take on leadership roles within the church is affirming. There are many more nice things that could be listed, and two stories have driven that home.

Two Examples

A few years back, I was working during an academy alumni weekend. It was late Saturday night, and most people had left campus. One former student was still on campus visiting with us. This student had graduated a few years before, and at that time, he had been more than ready to leave, frequently expressing frustration and complaints about the school and the staff.

As we visited, he reminisced about his time at the academy and was listing all the things that he liked, the fun times he had experienced, how great the school was. I asked him about how frustrated he had been when he graduated, and he acknowledged that was the case. He responded, “Sometimes you don’t know how good you have it ‘till it is gone.” Despite how he treated his teachers, we were making an impact on him. Even though it did not seem apparent at the time, he would eventually appreciate what the staff had done for him and the opportunities he had received. That was nice.

Since then, I have looked at student complaints very differently. While still hearing them out and adjusting as warranted, I also consider how these things will be perceived after a period of time.

Some years after this experience, I heard from another student. He said that he would be in town and wanted to stop by for a bit. This was a student who had made more than a few poor decisions and had ultimately been asked to withdraw from the school. When I heard that he was leaving the school, I went to find him and visit with him for a bit. I wanted him to know that regardless of his mistakes, he was still important to us and we cared about him.

Years later, as he sat in my living room, he shared how much that had meant to him. My reaching out to him had convinced him that I was not judging him. As we continued to visit, he talked about the church he was attending and the roles he was serving. He shared how he had found his way back to Christ. That was extremely nice. It was very humbling, and I can only say “Praise God” that He worked through me that time.

As educators, it is essential that we cling to these instances where the curtain is drawn back, and we catch a glimpse of the difference that we are making. It doesn’t happen often enough, and we frequently find ourselves questioning how effective we are. These fleeting moments where we see the impact can encourage us as we struggle through the difficult times. If we continue to read the full paragraph from which the initial quote was taken, we find: “This work is the nicest, the most difficult, ever committed to human beings. It requires the most delicate tact, the finest susceptibility, a knowledge of human nature, and a heaven-born faith and patience, willing to work and watch and wait. It is a work

than which nothing can be more important.”² I can assure you that the Adventist Church has many, many teachers who fit this description. It takes enormous amounts of tact and patience to hear out a venting parent, to avoid being defensive. Many times, just providing the opportunity for them to be heard is all that is needed to address the situation.

Teachers have to possess an understanding of “human nature” in order to help redirect students when they are exhibiting inappropriate behaviors. The knowledge of the workings of the human mind aid in providing instruction and guiding young minds. We have to exercise faith, to work, to watch, and to wait to see the fruits of our labors. I believe that in many instances we will not fully know how God has worked through us until we get to heaven.

What can be more important than the young people of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? It may be a bit self-serving, but I believe that Adventist education is one of the most important ministries of the church. Ellen White seemed to support that belief.

We should continue to put educators who possess tact, knowledge of human nature, faith, patience, and a willingness to work and watch and wait, into as many schools as we can. We should make an Adventist education available to every student in our churches. We should look beyond that and reach out to our communities, seeking families in need of the love of Christ. While education can be extremely difficult, it is also very rewarding. “It is a work than which nothing can be more important.”³ It is most surely the “nicest” work.

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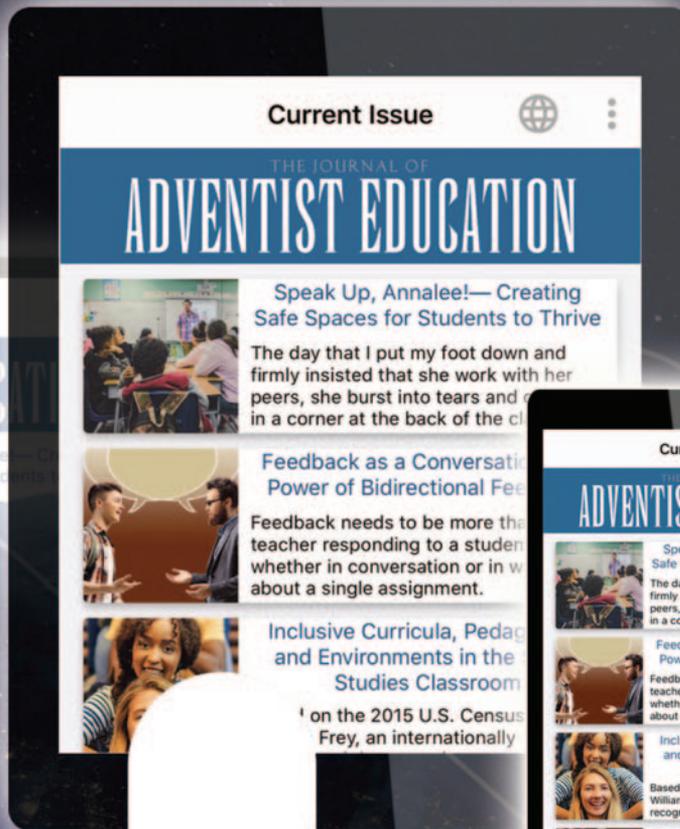
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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903), 292.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*



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