

S P I R I T U A L

M E N T A L

P H Y S I C A L



Ellen White

and the Harmonious Development Concept

In her influential work *Education*, Ellen G. White (1827-1915) began by defining authentic education as “the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers.”¹ This concept of harmonious, whole-person development has become a key element of Seventh-day Adventist educational philosophy,² appearing quite frequently in the official statements of mission, core values, and/or philosophy of Adventist schools, colleges, and universities worldwide.

What did Ellen White have in mind when she wrote about *harmonious development*? Did she focus exclusively on the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions, or did she extend the concept to include other elements? Perhaps more significantly, did she provide an indication of the process that educators might follow to achieve this goal?

In an endeavor to answer these questions, approximately 50 distinct passages were identified in the works of Ellen White in which the concept of harmonious development is discussed,³ including conceptually related terms, such as *balanced* and *symmetrical* education. Analyzing these passages, a number of conceptual clusters began to emerge, which were grouped under the themes of *significance*, *areas of development*, and *enabling practices*.

Importance of a Harmonious Development

Ellen White placed significant value on the concept of harmonious development, both within education and in life.

True education, she proposed, should result in well-balanced minds⁴ and harmonious characters,⁵ evidenced in a clear, strong intellect and in sound judgment.⁶ Experiencing harmonious development, students would be enabled to study effectively⁷ in order to prepare themselves more fully for usefulness in this world and to acquire moral fitness for eternal life.⁸ Her rationale: An individual cannot achieve his or her highest potential in any single dimension unless all faculties undergo development.⁹ Further, she affirmed that only an educational process that incorporates a harmonious development of the whole person can yield eternal results.¹⁰

Ellen White provided some illustrative cases. She noted, for example, that at creation, all of Adam’s faculties were well-balanced¹¹ and maintained that the primary aim of education is to restore humanity to this original state.¹² She observed that individuals of influence, such as Moses and Daniel, were those who developed harmoniously,¹³ and presented Jesus as the prime example of a “perfectly harmonious” life.¹⁴ Furthermore, she stated that those who are saved will have de-

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veloped harmonious characters.¹⁵

In the life experience, White proposed that a harmonious development results in happiness¹⁶ and in the blessing of God,¹⁷ while its absence will produce deficiencies.¹⁸ She maintained that a well-developed Christian life is “harmonious in all its parts”¹⁹ and that such a life will be a light in the world,²⁰ a powerful witness that will save others from ruin.²¹

Areas Included in a Harmonious Development

What dimensions should receive harmonious development? Ellen White proposed quite a variety of factors that should develop in a balanced way. In a number of passages, for example, she presented a pairing of elements. One of the most common dyads is that of mind and body,²² alternatively described as brain and muscles²³ or as the mental and physical faculties.²⁴ Another frequent linking was the harmonious development of the mental and moral powers,²⁵ identified at times as a balance of knowledge and character²⁶ or of literary and spiritual training.²⁷

Ellen White then combined these dimensions in her frequently cited triad of physical, mental, and moral development,²⁸ also described as the harmony of body, mind, and heart.²⁹ It might be noted, however, that even in the classic “harmonious development” reference cited earlier, a fourth factor emerges. After noting that true education harmoniously develops the physical, mental, and spiritual powers, she observed that such training “prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.”³⁰ The incorporation of the social dimension is further borne out in Ellen White’s assertions that mind, soul, and body are to be used for uplifting fellow human beings³¹; that body, mind, and soul are to be trained for divine service³²; and that the physical, mental, and moral faculties are to be developed for the performance of every duty.³³

A number of statements, however, take a somewhat different approach. These alternate groupings include the harmony of the emotions, words, and actions³⁴; of nerve, muscle, and will³⁵; and of brain, bone, and muscle³⁶—all of which are to be employed in active service.³⁷ In a final grouping, Ellen White stated that harmonious development includes temperance, kindness, and godliness,³⁸ or stated in another way, a duty to ourselves, to our fellow human beings, and to God. Taken together, the underlying concept seems to be that there must be a balanced, symmetrical, whole-person development that encompasses all aspects of life.³⁹

Enabling Practices Toward a Harmonious Development

How is this “harmonious development” to be achieved? How can we translate this ideal into educational practice? These are perhaps the central questions for Adventist schools. While Ellen White did not lay out, in precise terms, a recipe of the process to be followed, she did describe two fundamental approaches.

The first approach incorporates in the educational experience certain curricular components that complement the cognitive element. These ingredients focus primarily on psychomotor, social, affective, and spiritual dimensions, which may be prone to neglect in educational systems that primarily emphasize intellectual

development. The second approach is more didactic, and points toward instructional techniques that seek to develop a personal yet balanced profile of traits and abilities. (Figure 1 on page 18 provides a summary of these approaches.)

First, a look at the complementary dimensions of development:

Coupled with cognitive learning, the importance of *physical development* is a common theme in Ellen White’s writings on education. She advocated, for example, that students should combine “mind and body exercise,”⁴⁰ rather than dedicate their entire school time to sedentary learning. In order to attain this balance, schools should establish a system that includes physical culture⁴¹ and practical, work-oriented physical training.⁴² This concept of manual labor as education and as a key curricular dimension was developed quite extensively throughout Ellen White’s writings, starting with one of her earliest essays, entitled “Proper Education.”⁴³

Social skills and activities constitute a second curricular component of harmonious development. Ellen White advocated that students engage in cooperative learning approaches, avoiding rivalry and intense competition.⁴⁴ She advocated that students should also participate in community-oriented service activities as an integral part of the learning experience.⁴⁵ Finally, the social dimension should include elements of witness, in which learners share their understanding of and experience with God.⁴⁶

Affective elements, including values and attitudes, constitute a third curricular component. A key theme is the commitment to excellence. In order to develop harmoniously, Ellen White maintained, students must resolve to do their best in each learning activity,⁴⁷ aiming to reach the highest degree of excellence in order to uplift their fellow human beings and glorify God.⁴⁸ Students were to also develop self-reliance⁴⁹ and cultivate habits of order and self-discipline.⁵⁰ In this endeavor, resolute effort would be required by the learner, and teachers must avoid unhealthful permissiveness or indulgent flattery.⁵¹ Over time, students should progressively develop a virtuous character and a stable, coherent personality.⁵²

As a religious educator, Ellen White placed considerable emphasis on the *spiritual life*, which she held as integral to whole-person development. She maintained, for example, that students need both academic and spiritual formations,⁵³ and that a harmonious development is incompatible with moral depravity.⁵⁴

Although spiritual growth comes about through divine agencies,⁵⁵ she believed that human beings must still actively cooperate with God.⁵⁶ This occurs when the learner correctly understands God’s will,⁵⁷ seeks to be guided by the Holy Spirit,⁵⁸ and commits to serving God in every aspect of life.⁵⁹ This is accomplished through Bible study⁶⁰ and embracing the principles of God’s Word as a guide for all aspects of life.⁶¹ In essence, faith in God must be reflected in all of the attitudes, priorities, and activities of life.

In addition to the curricular components, Ellen White also proposed a number of *instructional interventions* to achieve harmonious development.

A key strategy, she believed, was for teachers and the learners themselves not to concentrate only on those areas for which they have a natural inclination, but to also cultivate those areas

where deficiencies exist.⁶² Teachers and students, for example, should avoid over-emphasizing a favorite topic or branch of study, to the neglect of other vital areas.⁶³ Although affirming students should cultivate their gifts and talents, which can indicate the direction for their lives,⁶⁴ Ellen White cautioned that attention must concurrently be given to a development of weaker traits and abilities, which, if neglected, could ultimately compromise lifelong success.⁶⁵ This, she advised, can be accomplished by taking particular care to strengthen these underdeveloped facets through intentional nurture.⁶⁶

In guiding student development, teachers should also institute an effective course of discipline, avoiding the extremes of overbearing harshness and permissive indulgence.⁶⁷ Such redemptive discipline should not focus on punishment, but rather on developing a personal understanding of each person's own character traits and inclinations, and consistently making every effort to "bend them toward the right."⁶⁸

In sum, each dimension of the individual is to be challenged and symmetrically cultivated.⁶⁹ Such harmonious development is the result of continual dependence on divine grace, a personal commitment to balanced development, the faithful improvement of opportunities, and earnest effort invested to accomplish this goal.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Based on a review of her writings, it appears that Ellen White emphasized the significance of the harmonious development concept and also identified a variety of areas to be included in this development. To assist educators in accomplishing this goal, she described in general terms, both curricular approaches and instructional strategies.

As Adventist educators, however, we still have important work to do. It may be that Seventh-day Adventist education has at times embraced the motto of "harmonious development" without fully understanding its scope and without devoting sufficient attention to its implementation. We may have, in effect, adopted a "high-sounding hope"⁷¹ that finds but sporadic tangible expression in our daily work.

Perhaps as educators, we should more closely examine Ellen White's proposed principles and processes for achieving a harmonious development, creatively explore how these might be implemented within our particular contexts, and then intentionally develop enabling learning experiences that transform our philosophy into educational practice. ✍️



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CURRICULAR COMPONENTS

Physical development

- Regular exercise
- Work-education program
- Healthy lifestyle and physical fitness

Social development

- Cooperative learning
- Community-oriented service
- Witness training and experience

Affective development

- Commitment to excellence
- Self-reliance and self-discipline
- Character and personality formation

Spiritual development

- Bible study to identify life principles
- Personal relationship with God
- Nurture of a faith commitment

INSTRUCTIONAL INTERVENTIONS

Addressing strengths and weaknesses

- Cultivating gifts and talents
- Remediating deficiencies
- Diversifying into undeveloped areas

Redemptive discipline

- Avoiding permissive indulgence
- Seeking to develop a personal understanding of behavior

Personal commitment

- Priority and personal effort for harmonious development
- Optimizing growth opportunities
- Dependence on divine power

Figure 1. Approaches to Operationalizing the "Harmonious Development" Concept in a Cognitively Dominant Educational Program

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1904), p. 13.
2. For example, "A Statement of Seventh-day Adventist Educational Philosophy" (2001), available at http://education.gc.adventist.org/documents/A_Statement_of_Seventh-day_Adventist_Educational_Philosophy_2001.pdf.
3. The complete published writings of Ellen White are available online at the Website of the Ellen G. White Estate, <http://www.whiteestate.org/search/>

search.asp.

4. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1913), pp. 295, 296; _____, *Messages to Young People* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1930), p. 239.

5. _____, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), vol. 4, p. 608 (1885).

6. _____, "Necessity of Temperance," *Signs of the Times* (July 8, 1880).

7. _____, "Our School Work," *Spalding and Magan Collection* (1985), p. 53.

8. _____, *Mind, Character, and Personality* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1977), vol. 1, p. 360; _____, *Testimonies*, op. cit., vol. 4, p. 425 (1885).

9. _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, op. cit., p. 541.

10. _____, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1900), p. 330; _____, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 360; _____, *Messages to Young People*, op. cit., p. 168.

11. _____, *Confrontation* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1971), p. 19; _____, *Temperance* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1949), p. 11.

12. _____, *Education*, op. cit., p. 13; _____, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1890), p. 595.

13. _____, *Christian Education* (Battle Creek, Mich.: International Tract Society, 1893), p. 52; _____, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1923), p. 119.

14. _____, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 18 (1990), p. 112.

15. _____, *Testimonies*, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 364 (1885).

16. _____, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1915), p. 92; _____, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 112; _____, *Testimonies*, op. cit., vol. 4, p. 417 (1885).

17. _____, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 1 (1981), p. 343.

18. *Ibid.*, vol. 18 (1990), p. 205.

19. _____, *Confrontation*, op. cit., p. 67.

20. _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, op. cit., p. 505.

21. _____, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 5 (1990), p. 405; _____, "Dress Reform," *Spalding and Magan Collection* (1985), p. 12.

22. _____, *Christian Education*, op. cit., p. 124; _____, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 112; _____, *Testimonies*, op. cit., vol. 4, p. 417 (1885).

23. _____, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 1 (1981), p. 34.

24. _____, *Child Guidance* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1954), p. 293; _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, op. cit., p. 53; _____, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 360; _____, *Messages to Young People*, op. cit., p. 168; _____, "The Treasures of God's Word," *Review and Herald* (July 3, 1900).

25. _____, "The Value of Our School Work," *The Bible Echo* (September 1, 1892); _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, op. cit., p. 541; _____, *Lift Him Up* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1988), p. 91; _____, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 374; _____, *Messages to Young People*, op. cit., p. 394.

26. _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, op. cit., p. 505.

27. _____, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, op. cit., p. 255. It might be noted that Ellen White's use of the term *literary* seems to include more than simply the use of literature. More broadly, it encompasses what we might at present refer to as the humanities in general, and includes such activities as reading, writing, speech, and other scholarly pursuits.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 434; _____, "Fashionable Dress," *The Health Reformer* (March 1, 1874); _____, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 360; _____, *Testimonies*, op. cit., vol. 4, p. 425 (1885); _____, *Testimonies to Southern Africa* (Capetown: South African Union Conference, 1977), p. 60.

29. _____, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn. 1905), p. 398.

30. _____, *Education*, op. cit., p. 13.

31. _____, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 359; _____, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, op. cit., p. 595.

32. _____, *Christ's Object Lessons*, op. cit., p. 330.

33. _____, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 360; _____, *Messages to Young People*, op. cit., p. 168.

34. _____, *Confrontation*, op. cit., p. 18.

35. _____, "Words of Encouragement," *Review and Herald* (May 26, 1904).

36. _____, *The Ministry of Healing*, op. cit., p. 398; _____, "Our School Work," *Spalding and Magan Collection* (1985), p. 53.

37. _____, *My Life Today* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1952), p. 136; _____, *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1932), p. 296.

38. _____, *Child Guidance*, op. cit., p. 39.

39. _____, "A Call to Greater Consecration," *Review and Herald* (January 14, 1904).

40. _____, *Testimonies to Southern Africa*, op. cit., p. 60.

41. _____, *Christian Education*, op. cit., p. 124.

42. _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, op. cit., p. 296; _____, *Messages to Young People*, op. cit., p. 239.

43. _____, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, op. cit., pages 16-46 (also found in _____, *Testimonies*, volume 3, pages 131-160, and originally published in *The Health Reformer*, September 1, 1872).

44. _____, *Testimonies*, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 424 (1885).

45. _____, "Missionary Work," *Review and Herald* (September 29, 1891); _____, "The Little Things," *The Youth's Instructor* (April 21, 1898).

46. _____, *Medical Ministry*, op. cit., p. 217; _____, *Testimonies*, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 466 (1885).

47. _____, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 1 (1981), p. 343.

48. _____, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 359; _____, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, op. cit., p. 595; _____, *Christian Education*, op. cit., p. 52; _____, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, op. cit., p. 119.

49. _____, *Child Guidance*, op. cit., p. 39; _____, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, op. cit., p. 57.

50. _____, "Words of Encouragement," *Review and Herald* (May 26, 1904).

51. _____, *Testimonies*, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 364 (1885).

52. _____, "A Call to Greater Consecration," *Review and Herald* (January 14, 1904); _____, "Giving of the Law," *Signs of the Times* (May 6, 1880).

53. _____, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, op. cit., p. 255.

54. _____, "Proper Education," *The Health Reformer* (July 1, 1873).

55. _____, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 20 (1993), p. 192.

56. *Ibid.*, vol. 18 (1990), p. 205.

57. _____, *Testimonies*, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 466 (1885).

58. _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, op. cit., p. 37; _____, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1898), p. 251; _____, *Lift Him Up*, op. cit., p. 91.

59. _____, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 51.

60. _____, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, op. cit., p. 434; _____, "The Treasures of God's Word," *Review and Herald* (July 3, 1900).

61. _____, "Giving of the Law," *Signs of the Times* (May 6, 1880); _____, "Doers of the Word," *The Youth's Instructor* (June 15, 1899).

62. _____, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, op. cit., p. 66.

63. _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, op. cit., p. 232.

64. _____, *Child Guidance*, op. cit., p. 166.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 39; _____, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, op. cit., p. 57.

66. _____, "Talents a Trust From God," *Signs of the Times* (October 28, 1886).

67. _____, *Testimonies*, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 532 (1885); _____, "The Treasures of God's Word," *Review and Herald* (July 3, 1900).

68. _____, "Noah's Time and Ours," *Signs of the Times* (December 20, 1877).

69. _____, *Medical Ministry*, op. cit., p. 296; _____, *My Life Today*, op. cit., p. 136.

70. _____, "Fashionable Dress," *The Health Reformer*, op. cit.; _____, "Address to Ministers," *Review and Herald* (August 30, 1892).

71. J. Franklin Bobbitt (1876-1956), an early curriculum theorist, noted, "Objectives that are only vague high-sounding hopes and aspirations are to be avoided. Examples are: 'Character building,' [and] the 'harmonious development'" (*How to Make a Curriculum* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924], p. 33).