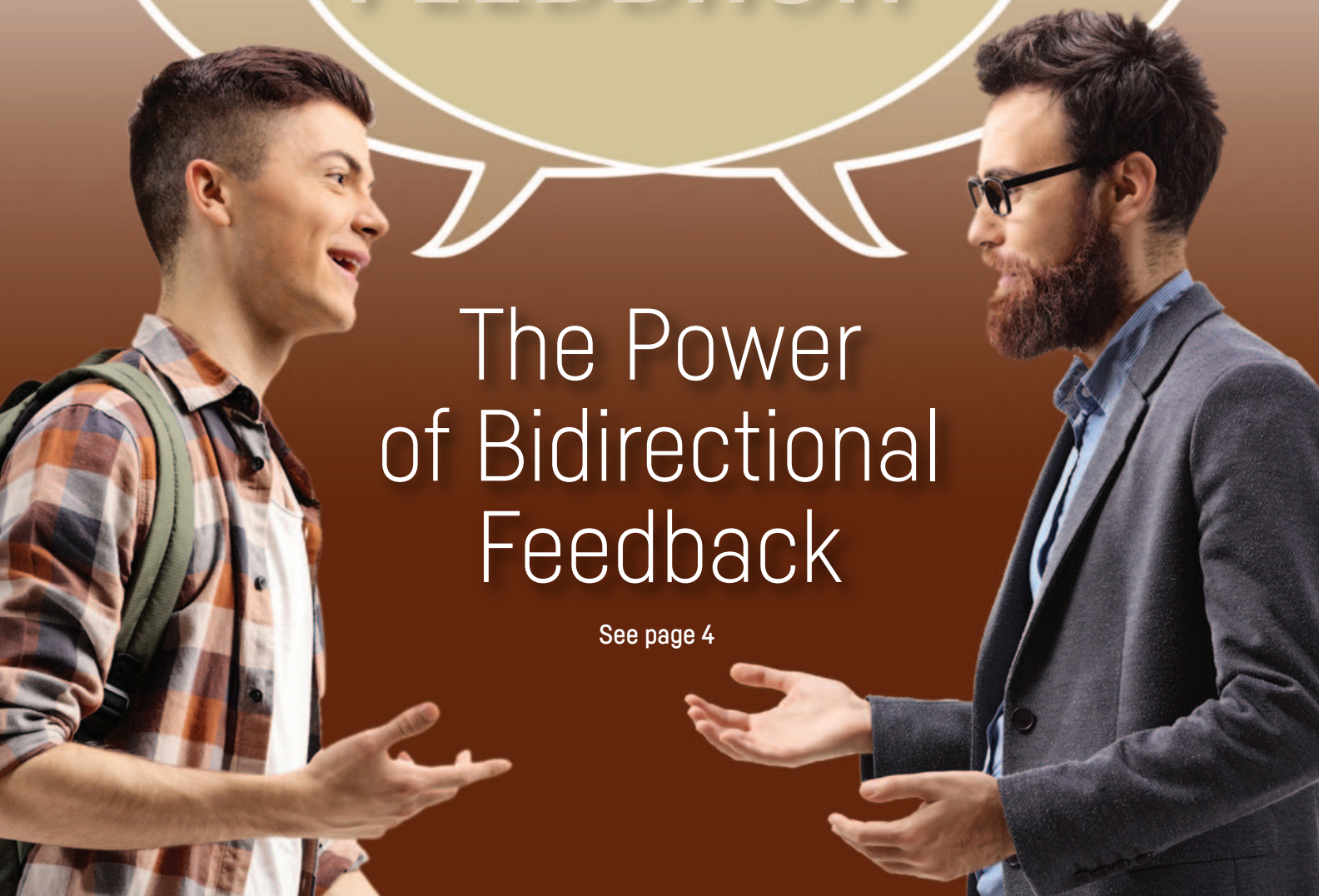


# ADVENTIST EDUCATION

*FEEDBACK*  
**as a Conversation:**



The Power  
of Bidirectional  
Feedback

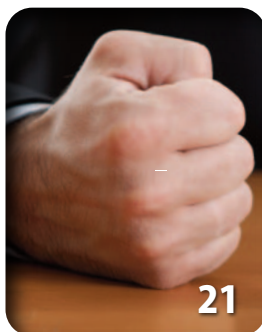
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Faith-Ann McGarrell

**A**nnalee Johnson<sup>1</sup> rarely spoke in class. She avoided eye contact and refused to participate in cooperative learning groups, writing groups, or any variation of group work. The day that I put my foot down and firmly insisted that she work with her peers, she burst into tears and cowered in a corner at the back of the classroom. Her keening cries agitated her peers, who in turn directed toward me looks as sharp as daggers. “Ms. McGarrell! You made Annalee cry!” The situation was further intensified by Mr. Johnson, Annalee’s father, who stormed into my classroom shortly after the 3 o’clock dismissal bell rang and announced with eyes glaring and fingers pointing: “It is NOT your job to FIX my child! Teach her to read and write! That’s it!”

Was I wrong to insist on Annalee’s participation? My intention was that every student would be actively engaged *all the time*. As a young student, I rarely fared well when it came to the “participation” assessment on assignments and report-card evaluations. During my teacher training, I learned that participation needed to be quantifiable, active, measurable—not just a subjective, nebulously observed quality. And so, when I finally had my own classroom, I made sure that everyone knew what was meant by “participation” and could be successful. There would be no “silent onlookers” in my classroom. At least, that was my vision until Annalee joined my class.

In my zeal to create a fast-paced, robust classroom environment ripe with conversation, activity, and creativity, I inadvertently conveyed another message—one devoid of grace, mercy, and the acknowledgement that each person is unique and communicates in dif-

ferent ways. Susan Cain, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Quiet*, a thoughtful reflection on introverts in an extrovert society, said the following: “The purpose of school should be to prepare kids for the rest of their lives, but too often what kids need to be prepared for is surviving the school day itself.”<sup>2</sup> And that survival is not limited to learning how to interact with peers, but also includes learning how to navigate teacher temperaments, unique classroom settings, curriculum demands, parental expectations, and so much more.

As Annalee’s teacher, I believed she needed to learn how to speak up, work with others, and learn how to thrive in an active environment, for this is what society requires and what I had been told repeatedly. For Annalee, such an environment was stressful and made no room for her own wonderfully unique way of giving a well-thought-out response to a question or assignment, or her essential need for time to process

before speaking and quiet time to recharge.

Thomas Armstrong in *Mindfulness in the Classroom: Strategies for Promoting Concentration, Compassion, and Calm* addresses what he refers to as “joining the quiet revolution.”<sup>3</sup> He observes that students in U.S. schools are experiencing levels of stress never seen before in its history, and that there is need for time dedicated to quiet, non-scripted reflection within each class period.<sup>4</sup> This lack of quiet time is responsible for several alarming findings such as an increase in the number of early elementary school children in the U.S. suffering from migraines and ulcers for which a clear connection to school-related stress has been established<sup>5</sup> to a third of U.S. adolescents being depressed or overwhelmed because of stress,

**Speak Up,  
Annalee!—  
Creating Safe Spaces for  
Students to Thrive**

*Continued on page 41*



# FEEDBACK AS A CONVERSATION:

## The Power of Bidirectional Feedback

**W**hat distinguishes an average performer from an expert? A piano player from a virtuoso? An amateur from a chess Grandmaster? Ericsson and Pool in *Peak: Secrets From the New Science of Expertise* discovered that the primary difference was deliberate practice.<sup>1</sup> “Deliberate practice is purposeful practice that knows where it’s going and how to get there.”<sup>2</sup> One element of deliberate practice is feedback.<sup>3</sup> Feedback is also ranked as one of the top contributors to student learning in Hattie’s *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*,<sup>4</sup> and Quinton and Smallbone observed that “Feedback is the most powerful single factor that enhances achievement and increases the probability that learning will happen.”<sup>5</sup>

Feedback can be made even more powerful when it is bidirectional—not just given to students but also sought

by teachers from students. Hattie discussed how he realized the value of bidirectional feedback. In the early 1990s, he had already discovered that feedback was one of the most important influences on achievement, but he didn’t understand the role it played. He thought its influence stemmed primarily from what teachers provided for students, but then he discovered that feedback was most impactful when it moved from student to teacher.<sup>6</sup>

How can teachers seek feedback from their students? One way is to ask for feedback from students on the feedback that they are given. A teacher gives feedback and asks students to reflect upon it, after which he or she responds to the students’ reflections. Thus, the instruction moves “from monologue to dialogue.”<sup>7</sup> The focus of this article is to discuss why getting students involved in a feedback dialogue is valuable and how teachers can use this simple technique to invite students into this conversation.

BY JULIE COOK

## The Value of a Feedback Dialogue

One value of engaging in a feedback dialogue is that it allows teachers to examine the effectiveness of the feedback they give. Price et al. studied how teachers and students viewed bidirectional feedback—feedback given and received. They concluded that teachers “lived with the dissonance about its benefits and their beliefs about the limited extent of student engagement but rarely attempted to measure the effect of the feedback they provid[ed].”<sup>8</sup> Faculty measured the effectiveness of feedback given to the students by its quantity rather than its quality.<sup>9</sup>

Student responses to feedback given by teachers can be used to test the quality of the feedback. Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel give an example of this; they compare self-testing to pilots relying on instruments instead of their senses, since pilots are vulnerable to a “host of perceptual illusions.”<sup>10</sup> Self-testing, like flight instruments, can reveal illusions of student mastery and help teachers take corrective action. For teachers, seeking feedback from students on feedback given is a way to self-test, to fly using instruments instead of perception. It answers the question, “Is the feedback given effective?” Every feedback cycle—giving students feedback and receiving their response to it—can then become a learning opportunity for both teachers and students. When teachers learn how their feedback was received, they can become even better at giving feedback.

A feedback dialogue also helps to facilitate clearer communication with students. Price et al. said, “Written feedback without dialogue often create[s] frustration and disengagement.”<sup>11</sup> For example, one student wrote about a teacher’s feedback, “What does clarify your aims and objectives mean?”<sup>12</sup> When teachers ask students to respond to feedback, they create an opportunity for students to help their instructors clarify the feedback.

Asking for a response also addresses another problem with monologic feedback. When teachers provide feedback without requiring a response,

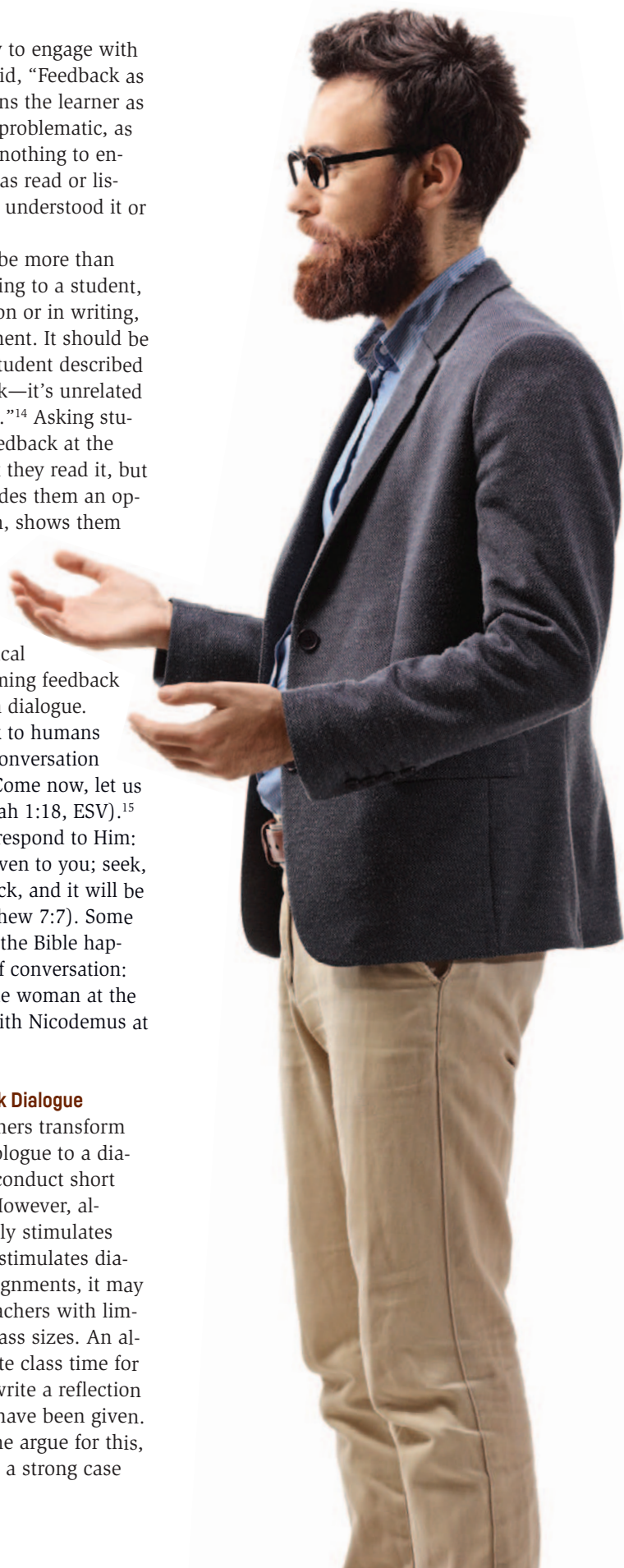
students are less likely to engage with it. Ajjawi and Boud said, “Feedback as ‘telling,’ which positions the learner as a passive recipient, is problematic, as the act of telling does nothing to ensure that the learner has read or listened to the feedback, understood it or acted upon it.”<sup>13</sup>

Feedback needs to be more than just a teacher responding to a student, whether in conversation or in writing, about a single assignment. It should be more than what one student described as “just a one-off block—it’s unrelated to everything else I do.”<sup>14</sup> Asking students to respond to feedback at the very least ensures that they read it, but more important, provides them an opportunity for reflection, shows them that feedback is valuable, and helps them connect feedback to their next assignment.

There is also a biblical precedent for transforming feedback from a monologue to a dialogue. God doesn’t just speak to humans but calls them into a conversation with Him. He says: “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18, ESV).<sup>15</sup> He invites humans to respond to Him: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). Some of the best learning in the Bible happened in the context of conversation: Jesus speaking with the woman at the well and His talking with Nicodemus at night.

## How to Start a Feedback Dialogue

How then can teachers transform feedback from a monologue to a dialogue? One way is to conduct short writing conferences. However, although this successfully stimulates student response and stimulates dialogue about essay assignments, it may not be practical for teachers with limited time and larger class sizes. An alternative is to designate class time for students to read and write a reflection on the feedback they have been given. Quinton and Smallbone argue for this, writing that: “There is a strong case



for linking time spent in class on reflection to the feedback and assessment cycle. Students are interested in and value feedback, and there is evidence . . . that it can prompt reflection and deeper learning.”<sup>16</sup>

Quinton and Smallbone developed a set of questions that can be asked during class time:

1. “What are my feelings about this feedback?” allows students “to separate their emotional response to the feedback from rational thought and begin to reflect.”<sup>17</sup>

2. “What do I think about the feedback?”<sup>18</sup> provides for analysis and evaluation of the feedback.

3. “Based on this feedback, what actions could I take to improve my work for another assignment?”<sup>19</sup> encourages students to consider the relationships between assignments.

Quinton and Smallbone’s questions are helpful; however, I have developed my own two questions to create a “Feedback on Feedback” survey that takes only about 10 to 15 minutes of class time: (1) What did you learn from the feedback? and (2) Do you have any questions about the feedback? The first question encourages reflection on the feedback; the second provides for clarification of the feedback. I have used this survey for several years and have found that it adds value to my feedback. Much of the enhanced value has occurred in the areas already mentioned regarding the importance of a dialogic approach to feedback.

### **The Impact of a Feedback Dialogue on a Classroom**

The first added value I have noticed is the provision of a window when I can assess the feedback I have given. Prior to using this survey, I was like the participants in the Price et al. study who didn’t know whether the feedback they had given was effective.<sup>20</sup> Kluger and DeNisi wrote: “Most critically, we . . . suggest that practitioners interested in developing and implementing feedback interventions take the time to test the effectiveness

Students rarely asked clarifying questions about my feedback unless it involved disputing a grade, but since I began to dedicate class time for reflection on my feedback, my students have felt more comfortable asking questions.

of . . . interventions rather than simply assume that they work.”<sup>21</sup> One way I was able to assess the feedback I provided was that it helped to reveal gaps between what I thought I was communicating and what my students understood. For example, one student asked why several sentences were underlined in her essay. I had intended this as a compliment to her since I underline sentences that stand out to me; however, given the panicked way she asked the question, I realized I needed to clarify my intent by adding positive comments whenever I underlined a sentence.

Reading student responses also showed me gaps in their learning, since they made comments such as the following:

- “How could I have tied the sub-topics together better?”
- “I don’t understand how to write consistently using third person.”
- “I got confused with in-text citations.”
- “I wish we had gone over APA [style] more before we turned in our papers.”

Knowing the topics about which students felt confused provided me with direction for planning subsequent class periods.

The survey also addressed how well students understood feedback. It both permitted and encouraged them to ask clarifying questions about the feedback I had provided. Often this involved a student raising his or her hand while taking the feedback survey and asking me to come over and talk. At this point, the student might point out a specific comment on his or her paper and ask, “What do you mean by this?” Before I gave the survey, students rarely asked clarifying questions about my feedback unless it involved disputing a grade, but since I began to dedicate class time for reflection on my feedback, my students have felt more comfortable asking questions. These questions and my follow-up has increased my students’ understanding of the feedback.

Students’ response to feedback has also deepened their learning. It solidifies what they have learned from the feedback and gives them additional insights into their writing. One student responded to the feedback survey by saying, “I’ve learned that to have an effective paper, you need to understand your sources.” Another student said, “Small statements I make that are specific help readers imagine what I’ve gone through.” Reflection has also provided opportunity for “feedforward”; that is, it provides them with further direction for future work. A student said, “The feedback pointed out what I need to practice and focus on, as well as encouraged me on my writing strengths.”

Starting a dialogue around feedback is clearly beneficial to both teachers and students. The value of feedback surveys became clear to me as the result of my experience in teaching four sections of composition each semester for several years. Each semester felt like a grading marathon; I had to respond to about 800 pages of student writing. Although I spent

10 to 15 hours per assignment giving feedback, it had not occurred to me to set aside even 10 or 15 minutes of class time for the students to reflect on my feedback!

Like many teachers, I knew that giving good feedback was one of my responsibilities, but I had thought very little about the students' responsibility regarding my feedback. I hoped that they read it and wished they would do more with it than crumple it up and throw it in the trash, but beyond that, I hadn't considered what they would or could do with it.

My lack of awareness could have occurred because feedback as dialogue is a relatively new concept in the literature, having developed only over the past 10 years or so.<sup>22</sup> I felt energized by my recognition that there was plenty of recent literature on the value of asking students to reflect on feedback. Dawson et al. discuss teachers like me

when they say, "We do not know to what extent staff and students have been brought along with the changing understandings of feedback occurring in the literature."<sup>23</sup> Only as I reflected on the amount of work I invested in grading essays and wondered how to ensure that my efforts achieved greater impact did I realize I needed to develop new strategies, and thus began to ask for feedback on my feedback. Later, I discovered the literature supported this move!

Teaching, especially teaching writing that requires copious amounts of reading and responding, allows little time for reflection. If you haven't already asked what impact your feedback is making on students, start doing so. The method I have used is simple and does not require much class time—maybe an additional hour out of a semester. It doesn't add much work, either, since many of the questions students ask about feedback can

be easily answered in class while they are completing the survey. It might require occasionally reviewing material already covered or adding lessons to a tight schedule, but even these need not take much time. A 10-minute lecture response to questions that several students have asked about the feedback given to them by the instructor is class time well spent.

### **Overcoming Barriers to a Feedback Dialogue**

While I believe I have a good case for the value and ease of bidirectional feedback, I do recognize there are barriers to achieving it. One barrier is that it may make teachers feel vulnerable. What if students criticize the feedback? I have received very few negative responses from students as a result of the feedback I have given them. The handful of negative responses



have been comments such as “Why a 76 percent?!” and “Hopefully, I never come across a literature review again in my life.” There will always be the possibility of negative responses, but even those reactions are instructive, revealing where change is needed, which is exactly what I want from my students when I give them feedback.

Some teachers might be afraid that by encouraging students to ask questions about feedback, they will open Pandora’s Box, out of which will emerge students who persistently haggle and criticize rather than pose legitimate questions or concerns. I’ve rarely had students use the feedback survey as a place to argue about their grade. If anything, asking for feedback has challenged my own assumptions about students—for example, that they only care about grades and not about learning. Before I started doing the feedback survey, most of my interactions over feedback were with students who expressed dissatisfaction about their grade. Now my interactions are with the whole class, and are more diverse than in the past. The biggest surprise is the positive reactions I’ve received from my feedback. Students have made comments such as these:

- “I loved the feedback; it helped me see what I need to work on.”
- “The feedback I got on the essay was clear and made sense.”
- “The feedback was great to better my grammar.”
- “I liked the way you read through my paper; you helped me notice things.”
- “Thank you for the detailed feedback.”

Those comments encouraged me and made me want to continue the hard work of feedback. Teachers often think of feedback as a tool to motivate students, but positive feedback from students can motivate us as well. Their responses help us see that we are not responding to work in a vacuum and that the work of feedback does have an impact on students.

In *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*, Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel recommend making small moves in teaching that can significantly affect student learning.<sup>24</sup> They wrote: “Much of what we’ve been doing as teachers and students isn’t serving us well, but some comparatively simple changes could make a big difference.”<sup>25</sup> One such change is to engage in bidirectional feedback. ✍

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***This article has been peer reviewed.***

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# INCLUSIVE



## Curricula, Pedagogies, and Environments in the Social Studies Classroom

**A**ccelerated globalization and increased human migration means that many schools worldwide are comprised of students and teachers from different races and cultural groups. Based on the 2015 U.S. Census report, William Frey, an internationally recognized demographer, stated that a “no majority” America is already here in the nation’s schools.<sup>1</sup>

Worldwide, trends are similar. A 2017 United Nations report estimated that more than 250 million people were living in a country other than the one in which they were born,<sup>2</sup> and in 2019, regions in the world that hosted the most immigrants included Europe (82 million), North America (59 million), and Northern Africa and Western Asia (49 million).<sup>3</sup>

For this reason, teaching approaches must go beyond celebrating, tolerating, and accepting diversity toward cultivating deep understanding and fostering the inclusion of all students. Defining learning outcomes is a primary challenge in teaching and learning about diversity; thus, adopting and practicing culturally responsive ideology responds to all students’ needs by focusing on inclusive curricula, pedagogies, and environments.

A new vision for classroom education requires that teachers gain a better understanding of themselves and their students. Many of today’s students are personally connected to multiple cultures, in varying degrees, by race, ethnicity, religion, abilities, language, and other ways, making their individual identities consist of a series of layers. For example, it is difficult to categorize into one specific cultural group a biracial student or one whose parents come from different nations. Furthermore, teachers will find it difficult to interact with students in a culturally responsive way if they do not

BY JANIE DANIEL HUBBARD

understand the students' cultural identity.<sup>4</sup> Students' identities structure frameworks from which they interpret knowledge, beliefs, and associations taught and modeled in schools. Thus, when teachers understand how identity and culture affect teaching and learning, they will be better equipped to create culturally responsive pedagogies.<sup>5</sup>

Teachers are most effective when they are open to learning with and from students and families.<sup>6</sup> When teachers embrace cultural humility, they will commit themselves to self-examination, critiquing, and diminishing the power imbalances in teacher-student, teacher-parent, and teacher-community dynamics.<sup>7</sup> They will practice ongoing, humble reflection on how knowledge is fraught with bias and false stereotyping, and seek resources that build upon students' assets and sense of belonging, even cultivating this sense of belonging if it does not yet exist.<sup>8</sup> In order for teachers to create positive and socially meaningful classroom environments, students' cultural and linguistic assets must be foundational elements.

A variety of sources can help educators begin to practice humble reflection. Psychologists at Harvard University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington created Project Implicit, a series of Implicit Association Tests, for testing hidden biases.<sup>9</sup> Another important source, the Center for Nonviolent Communication, offers books, videos, and training sessions designed to help people understand how to interact with others based on the concept of *power with*, rather than *power over* others.<sup>10</sup>

### Creating Positive Perspectives on Parents and Families

There is no shortage of research about how family involvement provides benefits for students. The phrase "family involvement," though, seems exclusive and one-sided. While invitations from school administrators to parents may appear to be calls for collaboration, they are often requests from people seeing themselves as experts, or sometimes the product of compulsory policies linking parents and communities (Home and School Associations) to school-improvement initiatives. The provider-receiver scenario places families in a subordinate position even when the communications are intended to increase parental involvement.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, cultural humility practices build upon the strengths and assets of a community's disenfranchised members. "Through self-reflection, students and practitioners are encouraged to relinquish the role of expert, work actively to address power imbalance in communication to create respectful and dynamic partnerships with the community, and ultimately become the student of the community."<sup>12</sup> While it is important for school administrators and community liaisons to reach out to communities, teachers can also create personalized opportunities that highlight and value families.

The *Family History Museum* is one example of a personalized opportunity for students of any age to share family traditions and values in the classroom. The museum assignment allows each student to identify one or more items important to his or her family. Students learn about concepts such as heirlooms, ancestry, descendants, and more complex

Most curriculum standards mandated by U.S. states embed opportunities to include social-justice perspectives in civics (e.g., citizenship, laws, equity, common good, civil rights, voting) and history (e.g., European exploration, westward expansion, U.S. Thanksgiving, Christopher Columbus' discoveries).

concepts according to their age or grade level, when they are asked to bring an item or a photo of an item important to the family (e.g., button, coin, recipe, grandfather's vest, hat, Bible, and or other artifact). Teachers help students understand that an heirloom does not need to be expensive or of museum quality.

### Getting Started

Teachers should obtain assistance, if necessary, in sending bilingual letters or making multilingual telephone calls to parents and guardians, explaining the new museum and asking them to submit suitable items to be placed on display, along with captions describing each one. Some parents will send in items for display. Make sure to have a system in place for labeling all items received so that they can be returned. Some families might prefer to send photos of artifacts, especially if the heirloom is very expensive or one of a kind. In this case, photos should also be labeled so that they can be returned. For display, photos can be glued to *museum cards* that briefly explain each heirloom, and then mounted on a large bulletin board as an alternative to displaying tangible items. Invite families, students, school staff, faculty, custodians, and others to view the museum and leave positive comments on teacher-made *comment cards*.

A second activity uses *The Iceberg Theory* and model to compare cultures. In 1976, Edward T. Hall, an American anthropologist, developed the iceberg analogy of culture.<sup>13</sup> Hall theorized that there were both visible and invisible cultural characteristics. The visible cultural expressions (e.g., art, music, food) are at the tip of the iceberg, while deeper

cultural dimensions (e.g., approaches to problem solving, gender roles, attitudes about age, importance of space) are concealed within the lower portion of the iceberg. Various *Iceberg Culture Models* are located on the Internet; this site shows one example of the model: <http://opengecko.com/in/terculturalism/visualising-the-iceberg-model-of-culture/>.<sup>14</sup>

### Getting Started

At the start of the activity, select students from different cultures (U.S. cultures and/or international cultures), combining them into groups of two, and providing each pair with a copy of the iceberg model and a graphic organizer to use in recording comparisons. Ask students to discuss cultural differences and similarities, using the comparison organizer to record their observations, which they can then share with the class. Note that the one-on-one interaction and partner discussions are the most important activity parts because the process is a personal and social learning experience. Consider also using this activity during teacher professional-development sessions to model the strategy for teachers, as well as to engage them.

### Reshaping the Curriculum

Gloria Ladson-Billing's theoretical perspective emphasizes culturally relevant pedagogy that "develops students academically, nurtures and supports cultural competence, and helps students develop a sociopolitical or critical consciousness."<sup>15</sup> Let's consider this from a social-science perspective. Most curriculum standards mandated by U.S. states embed opportunities to include social-justice perspectives in civics (e.g., citizenship, laws, equity, common good, civil rights, voting) and history (e.g., European exploration, westward expansion, U.S. Thanksgiving, Christopher Columbus' discoveries).

By comparison, *everybody's history* confronts typical historical narratives taught in classrooms—those possibly found in textbooks or passed along from single dominant-culture viewpoints. Dominant narratives in education dismiss or ignore marginalized groups' perspectives and lead to superficial content and pedagogies. A social-justice approach to teaching history, as well as other disciplines, requires teachers to consider how children's and adolescents' identities influence their views of history and society as typically presented in schools and mainstream culture.<sup>16</sup> Dominant-culture narratives build on status-quo conceptions accepted as natural and common sense, and close doors to rethinking missing, misleading, and/or inaccurate information.

For example, teachers often teach iconic individuals within hagiography contexts or suggest that they should serve as models for character education. Throughout the U.S., students' introduction to Helen Keller often includes donning blindfolds and earplugs and learning bits of Braille along with activities attempting to focus attention on human beings' ability to overcome challenges. Keller is acclaimed as one of the first total sight- and hearing-impaired individuals in the U.S. to understand, write, and speak the English language and attend college. What is often missing from classroom lessons is that Keller was a human being with eco-

nomical challenges and personality flaws as well as successes. She was a student, writer, lecturer, vaudeville performer, and activist. The real heart of her story is her central role in stimulating attitude changes around the world. Keller spent much of her adult life as an activist for the poor, African Americans, and people with disabilities. She was one of the first civil-rights leaders for people with disabilities, as she traveled the world raising money and advocating for change, acceptance, and equal opportunities for people with impaired vision and hearing.<sup>17</sup> A limited and superficial focus on Keller's disabilities often ignores her important contributions to society.

Another example is the American holiday, Thanksgiving. The Pilgrims' journey to America and subsequent thanksgiving meal with local Native Americans is based in truth, evidenced by the primary source, Winslow and Bradford's *Mourt's Relation or Journal of the Plantation of Plymouth*.<sup>18</sup> In numerous U.S. classrooms, though, the Native American experience remains untold. Many students would not be able to identify the tribe's name, culture, or history. The traditional story is comforting and safe for some, but hurtful to others. Similarly, shirtless caricatures of Native Americans with head-feathers, teepees, and totem poles are offensive to countless families and disregard differences among Native American cultures in the U.S., since more than 600 indigenous tribes are traced to this land.<sup>19</sup>

Teaching about Christopher Columbus's *discoveries* is another curriculum example that requires research and rethinking. Though it is appropriate to teach about Columbus's voyages, we misinform students when we tell them that he *discovered* America. While the Columbian Exchange enabled Western and Eastern Hemispheres to exchange ideas, animals, cultures, and plants, Columbus never actually stepped foot on the North American continent, and his personal actions while in Hispaniola were far from heroic. Native people known as the Taino, who numbered in the millions in 1492, inhabited most of Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola (presently Haiti and the Dominican Republic), and Puerto Rico, were forced into slavery. Not producing enough gold guaranteed punishment by loss of limb or death. Eventually, the Europeans' harsh treatment and diseases resulted in the Taino population's extermination.<sup>20</sup> Currently, students may see media reports about petitions, protests, and vandalism related to Columbus statues and monuments and wonder why this is happening.

Many U.S. elementary social-studies curriculum standards seem overly focused on military conflicts and leaders (from the American Revolution through the "War on Terrorism"). Helping students learn about the concept of *peacemaking* can be an inspiring way to incorporate balanced content, inclusiveness, and culturally responsive teaching within an international context. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Notable Trade Book for Young People, *Great Peacemakers: True Stories From Around the World* by Ken Beller and Heather Chase,<sup>21</sup> contains sections featuring 20 diverse lifelong peacemakers representing different genders, classes, races, ethnicities, and cultures—both contemporary and historic (see Box 1). Each section includes a

brief biography, a page of quotes, and one or more photographs. The framework is versatile, so students may jigsaw<sup>22</sup> the biographies and study different approaches to peace (e.g., choosing nonviolence, living peace, honoring diversity, valuing all life, and caring for the planet). The journal *Social Studies and the Young Learner* published a full lesson plan based on this book, entitled “What Is a Peacemaker: How Do They Solve Problems?”<sup>23</sup> The plan is available to teachers at [https://www.socialstudies.org/publications/ssyl/januaryfebruary2015/what\\_is\\_a\\_peacemaker\\_how\\_do\\_they\\_solve\\_problems/](https://www.socialstudies.org/publications/ssyl/januaryfebruary2015/what_is_a_peacemaker_how_do_they_solve_problems/).

### Controversial Issues

Rationales for including controversial issues in the social-studies curriculum include student outcomes such as “developing an understanding and commitment to democratic values, increasing interest in engagement in public life, learning important content, improving critical thinking, and building more sophisticated interpersonal skills.”<sup>24</sup> Teachers are gatekeepers of curriculum in their classrooms, and with this title comes much responsibility.

When addressing controversial topics in the classroom, it is essential to have a good understanding of the cultures represented and to anticipate how students and parents might respond. Some topics will require advanced notice to both administrators and parents. Taking the time to discuss curricular corrections with an administrator, or sending letters home to parents notifying them that a sensitive topic will be taught and giving them time to respond are good ways to open the discussion.

Much research tells us that teachers hesitate to approach curriculum topics perceived as controversial (e.g., Christopher Columbus’s entrance into the Americas, Andrew Jackson and the Trail of Tears, contemporary laws, current events) due to reasons such as personal discomfort, parents’ perceptions, and simply not knowing how. “Thanks to poor preparation, some teachers have not acquired the background knowledge or the pedagogical skills—or both—to lead in-depth discussions” or reasoned, informed debates.<sup>25</sup>

In February 2017, the *Education Week* Research Center surveyed more than 830 K-12 U.S. teachers and other school-based instructional staff about their experiences teaching about controversial topics, particularly during a time of strong partisanship. While most educators said they could discuss controversial issues civilly, only 44 percent said their training adequately prepared them to handle those controversial or perceived controversial discussions with students. Twenty-three percent said they had not had specific training in this area, and most had not received guidance from their administrators on how to talk about such issues with their students.<sup>26</sup> Today’s media-intense world requires teacher educators and school administrators to provide pre-service and in-service teachers with the tools and professional development needed to answer students’ questions and engage them in honest, inclusive inquiry.

Inquiry is a form of teaching and learning that allows teachers to serve as facilitators while students research answers to big questions (also known as “compelling ques-

tions”) to form their own narratives. The teacher makes primary and secondary sources offering various perspectives available to students so they can (1) develop questions and plan inquiries; (2) apply interdisciplinary concepts and tools; (3) conduct evidence-based evaluation of the various sources; (4) communicate their conclusions to stakeholders (e.g., administrators, parents, students); and (5) take informed action. One example of such an inquiry structure is the College, Career, and Civic Life Framework (C3) located online.<sup>27</sup> Multiple teaching resources, including lesson templates for different student levels, may be found at <https://www.socialstudies.org/c3/c3lc>. Teachers can give students the option of using writing, art, role-play, and project-based learning in communicating their conclusions.

Culturally Responsive Teaching relies on creating inclusive learning environments, researching and rethinking the

## Box 1. Resources for Seventh-day Adventist Teachers

### Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education

A Christ-centered philosophy of education is built on recognizing God as the Creator (Genesis 1:27). Humanity’s quest for belonging and understanding is fulfilled in relationship with God. The greatest commandment is to love God wholly, and others sincerely (Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-34). Cultural humility, then, requires commitment to embracing a humble spirit (1 Peter 5:5; Philippians 2:3, 4) and learning to value and “respect the dignity of all human beings” (Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education (Policy FE05, FE10): <http://circle.adventist.org/download/PhilStat2003.pdf>).

### Articles

- *The Journal of Adventist Education’s* special issue on Culturally Responsive Teaching in Adventist Schools: <https://jae.adventist.org/en/2018.80.3>.

- Charity Garcia and Charissa Boyd, “Engaging in Culturally Relevant Teaching: Lessons From the Field,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 81:3 (July-September 2019): 17-23: <https://jae.adventist.org/en/2019.81.3.4>.

- Chris Blake, “Build Your Own Peace Week,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 75:5 (Summer 2013): 43-46: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201375054304.pdf>.

### Online Sources

- Adventist Peace Fellowship Discussion Forum: <https://www.facebook.com/adventist.peace/>.

- Adventist Peace Fellowship Podcast and Radio: <http://www.adventistpeace.org/podcast/>.

- Historic Adventist Peacemakers: <http://www.adventistpeace.org/historic-peacemakers>.

curricula we teach, and using pedagogies that engage everyone's backgrounds and life experiences. Equitable education relies on a vision and conviction that all students have assets to contribute in democratic spaces within schools and communities. Teachers who embrace cultural humility honor students by helping them define personal and social identities and their places within the shared society. All students, of course, must be protected at school; however, protection that includes *all students* derives from teachers who practice fairness and equity. Every curricular discipline can be taught in authentic, culturally responsive ways. ✍

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*This article has been peer reviewed.*

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# RESEARCH

# and the Search for

# TRUTH



# TRUTH

Research is a systematic inquiry based on gathering and analyzing information designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.<sup>1</sup> While research is fundamentally a search for new knowledge, that knowledge should also be trustworthy, a true and accurate reflection of reality.<sup>2</sup> This is why researchers seek to minimize false positives and negatives,<sup>3</sup> and why they endeavor to triangulate. Consequently, research is ultimately a search for truth, for trustworthy knowledge. Not Truth in its absolute sense, but certainly those dimensions of truth that are accessible, within our human limitations.

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BY JOHN WESLEY TAYLOR V

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## The Search for What Is True

In Jesus' trial, Pilate asked a key question, "What is truth?" (John 18:38, NKJV).<sup>4</sup> If we were to pose that question, or its counterpart "How does one know what is true?" to a cross-section of contemporary society, we would encounter a range of responses: "It's been that way for a long time." "Everyone agrees." "It seems obvious." "I feel strongly about it." "It's certainly reasonable." "It all fits together." "She's the expert and surely must know." "It just works!"<sup>5</sup>

We recognize, however, that each of these criteria for determining truthfulness presents inherent limitations. Every tradition, for example, must have a beginning. How did the first person know what was true? While I may feel very strongly that something is true, what happens when two people feel strongly about the same thing but in opposite ways?<sup>6</sup> While everything may indeed fit together beautifully, what if one started with a false premise and then ensured that each addition was a perfect match?<sup>7</sup> Who is going to be the authority? And how does he or she know, after all?<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps we can empathize with Thomas's predicament: "We don't know anything for certain!"<sup>9</sup> Before any hasty attempt to discard any of the above criteria, we should note that each has value and can contribute toward a better understanding of truth.<sup>10</sup> The point, however, is that not one of these can guarantee truth.

## What About Scientific Research?

One of the more pervasive truth criteria is that of empirical evidence.<sup>11</sup> This approach is frequently expressed in statements such as, "It's supported by research" and "It's scientifically sound." Research, with its systematic methodology and its checks and balances, such as peer review and replication of findings, is certainly one of the more promising avenues through which we can approximate truth.

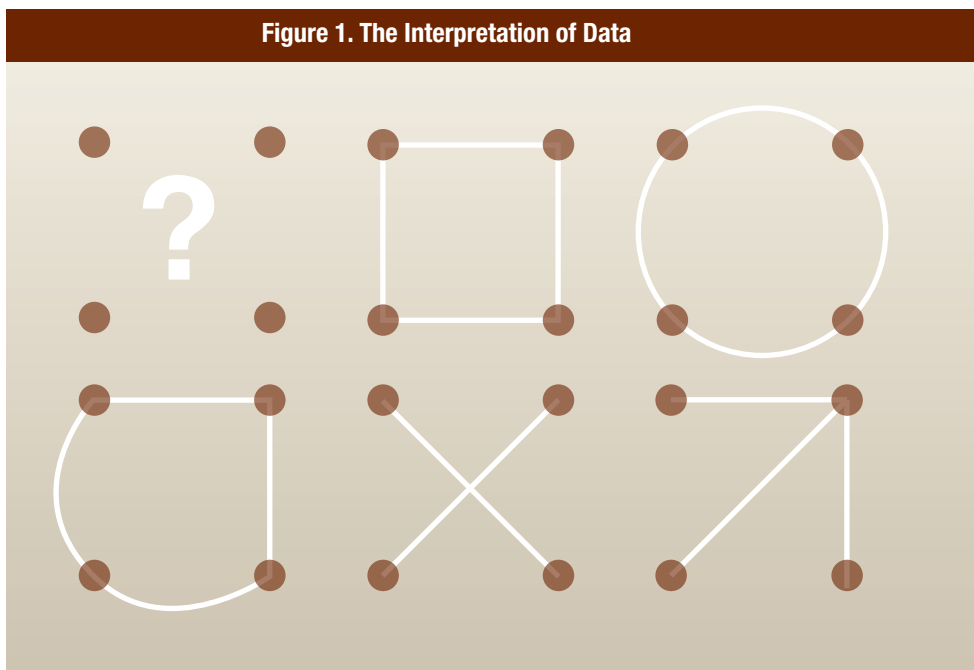
We would be naïve, however, if we did not also recognize the limitations

of research, several of which are highlighted in Scripture. Do we truly perceive what is out there, or could it be that "we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV)? Could appearances, at times, be deceiving (1 Samuel 16:7)? Data must be interpreted to become meaningful. Is it possible for people to review the same data and yet arrive at different interpretations because of differences in worldview?<sup>12</sup> (See Figure 1.) Finally, is all the evidence ever in?

encounter with Pilate, Christ had prayed, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17). In the biblical worldview, therefore, the Word, whether written or incarnate, is truth. This implies that knowledge of truth is both intellectual (learning about God, His words, and His works) and relational (knowing Christ personally and experientially).

What are the implications of this perspective for the Christian, and es-

Figure 1. The Interpretation of Data



Might we know only in part (1 Corinthians 13:9-12), and this partial knowledge lead us to faulty conclusions?<sup>13</sup>

## The Christian Response

What, then, is the answer? How can we know what is truth? Regrettably, the clamor of the crowd distracted Pilate, and he turned away before Jesus could answer his question. As is often the case with God, however, Christ had, in fact, answered the question before it was asked, when He stated: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Accordingly, for the Christian, truth is a Person. Furthermore, hours before His

pecially for one who engages in research? There are several fundamental concepts:

1. *Truth begins with God, not with humankind.* James wrote: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17), and John added: "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). Consequently, human beings are but receivers of God's revelation of Truth. Although we can construct interpretations or applications of truth, we do not ultimately create Truth. This does not imply that we are mere passive recipients. God desires us to actively discover and, at times, recover truth (e.g., John 5:39; Job 12:7; Proverbs 2:4, 5).

2. *Because Truth resides in God and God does not change, Truth is stable.* The Bible speaks of “the God of truth” (Isaiah 65:16) and asserts that “truth is in Jesus” (Ephesians 4:21).<sup>14</sup> It also states that God is eternal and unchanging, with affirmations such as these: “From everlasting to everlasting, You are God” (Psalm 90:2) and “I am the Lord, I do not change” (Malachi 3:6).<sup>15</sup> As a result, God’s Truth is constant, as David confirmed, “The truth of the Lord endures forever” (Psalm 117:2).<sup>16</sup> This implies that the principles of God’s Truth are generalizable across time, place, and case.<sup>17</sup> The immutability and transferability of Truth do not suggest, however, that human understanding of truth cannot develop over time. David, for example, was deeply troubled by the suffering of the righteous and the apparent prosperity of the wicked.<sup>18</sup> Not until he entered the sanctuary and reflected on its meaning was he able to glimpse the larger picture of God’s Truth.<sup>19</sup>

3. *All Truth possesses unity because it comes from the same Source.* We noted that coherence cannot establish Truth, given that we might start with a false assumption. Thus, not all that is consistent is true. Nevertheless, that which is true is internally consistent, and Truth will be in harmony with itself wherever and whenever it is found. Consequently, research findings should evidence a good fit with other instances of truth. If there seems to be contradiction, there is error—in terms of what we have just discovered or perhaps in what we previously regarded as truth. Alternatively, both declarations could be true (or potentially, both false), with the apparent contradiction denoting a problem with our finite understanding and serving as a call for further study and reflection.<sup>20</sup>

4. *Truth is infinite because God is infinite.* Because we are finite, we will never fully comprehend or exhaust the extent of God’s Truth. The frontiers of our understanding are

also the horizons of our ignorance. Visually, our circle of knowledge is surrounded by the vast universe of what we don’t know or, much less, understand. Our only contact with that universe, however, is at the circumference of our circle (see Figure 2).<sup>21</sup> When the circle of knowledge is small, the circumference is also small, and we might be led to believe that there are only a few things that we do not yet know. As the area of the circle grows through learning and research, so does the circumference, and our points of contact with the unknown thereby increase. Consequently, the more we learn, the more we realize how much there is yet to learn, and the more humble we should become.

5. *We must continually grow in our knowledge and understanding of the truth.* It is not sufficient to stand, anchored in the truth. According to Scripture, we must walk in the truth (2 John 4; 3 John 3 and 4). The act of walking denotes movement and progress. How presumptuous it would be, then, for anyone on that journey to declare or act as if he or she possesses all truth! A Christian will never possess all truth. After all, God’s Truth is infinite, and we are finite. Nevertheless, through study, research, and experience, through collaboration with other truth seekers and divine guidance, the proportion of error should begin to drop away, with the

ultimate goal that all the Christian possesses should be truth.

6. *Because God is the Source of all truth, all truth is ultimately God’s truth.*<sup>22</sup> If something is true (even if it is the truth about the untruth<sup>23</sup>), it is an extension of God’s Truth, and we must recognize that connection. In the Christian perspective, this is a core purpose of research and of education—highlighting the link between discovered truth and its Source. While we recognize that all truth is a manifestation of God’s ultimate Truth, we must also acknowledge that Christians do not have a monopoly on truth. Non-believers also discover truths. “[God] causes his sun to shine on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45, NIV)<sup>24</sup> because He wants all “to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). We should not be surprised, therefore, if agnostics or even atheists discover important facets of God’s truth. Is there a difference between the Christian and the non-Christian? While the non-Christian can encounter truth in his or her journey through life, the Christian acknowledges and values the Source of that truth.

Figure 2. The Circle of Knowledge

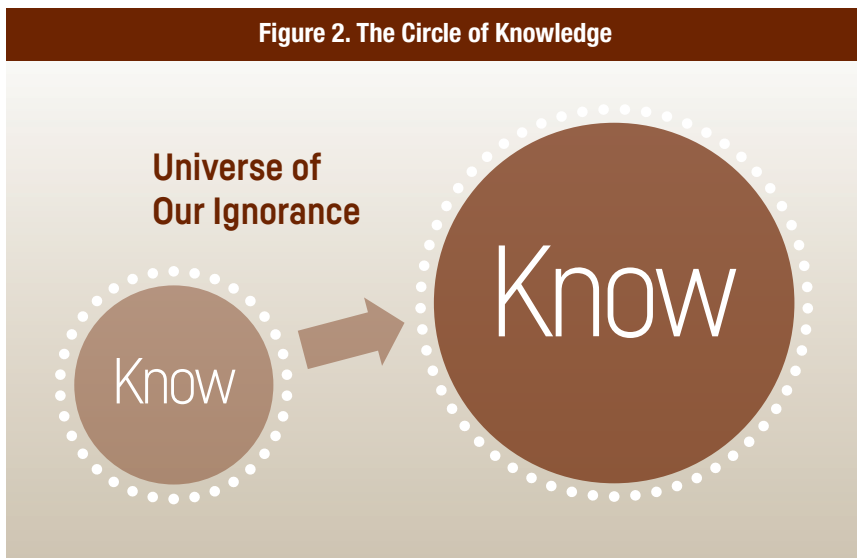




Figure 3. Key Elements in the Process of Attaining Truth

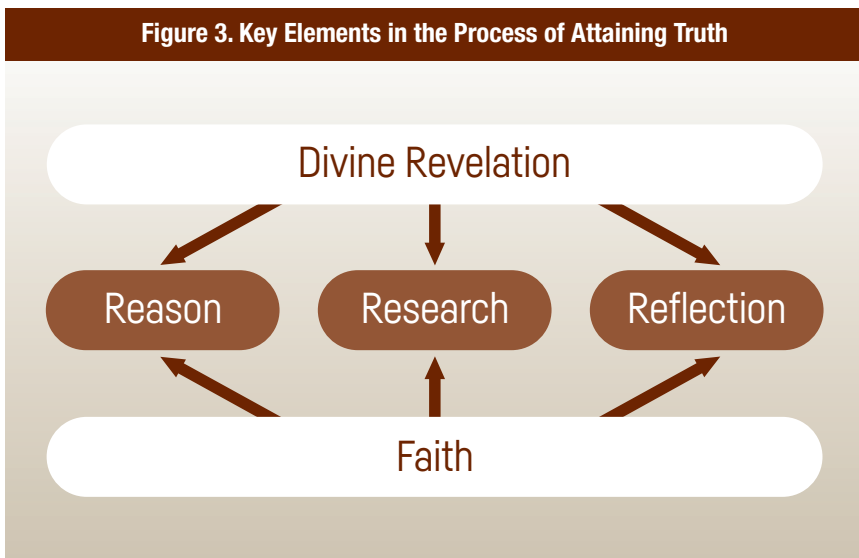


Figure 4. Truth “Changed” Into a Lie

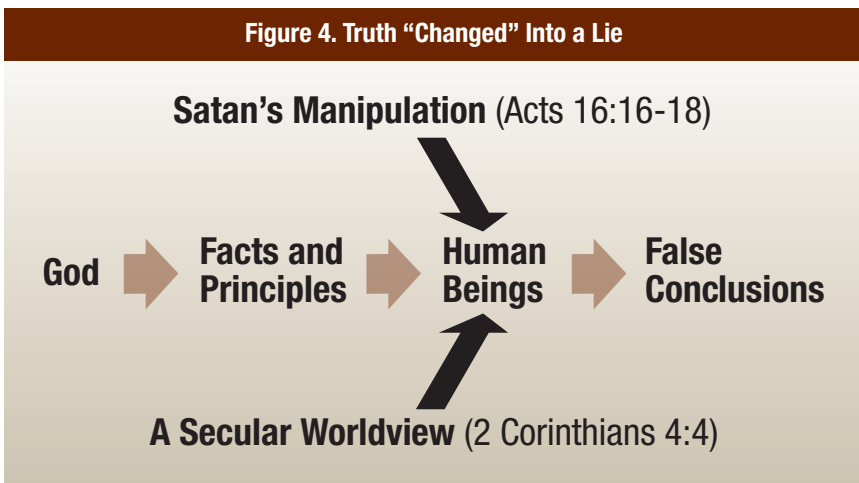
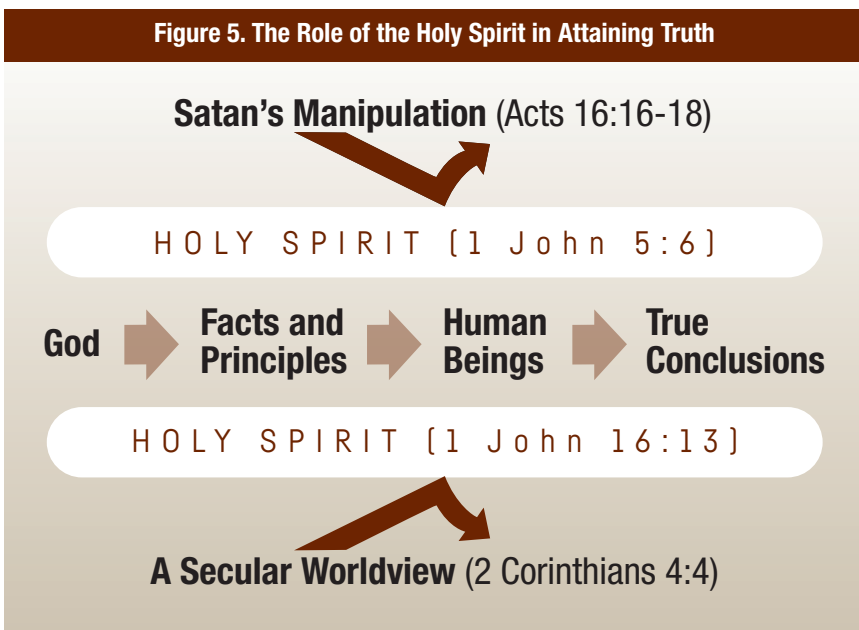


Figure 5. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Attaining Truth



### Attaining Trustworthy Knowledge

The question *How do we obtain truth?* is particularly relevant within the context of research. Fundamentally, we are enabled to discover truth because God takes the initiative, sharing facts and principles with us. Divine revelation is the channel through which God reveals truth to human beings.<sup>25</sup> Reason, research, and reflection, nevertheless, each play a key role, while faith is integral to the entire process (see **Figure 3**).<sup>26</sup> Our reasoning powers, as well as the ability to conduct research and to reflect on knowledge and experience, are gifts from God that enable us to discover and understand truth. Faith, in turn, is a sincere and wholehearted commitment to God’s manifestation of Truth.

There is a problem, however. Paul speaks of those “who changed the truth of God into a lie” (Roman 1:25, KJV). While God’s Truth cannot be destroyed, it can, in fact, be distorted. When an object is viewed through a warped lens, our perception of that object is deformed, although the object itself has not changed. How does this misrepresentation of truth occur? There are at least two possibilities: It can result from Satan’s direct manipulation of God’s Truth (Acts 16:16-18)<sup>27</sup>; and, perhaps more subtly, through our acceptance of a secular worldview (2 Corinthians 4:4), which leaves God out of the equation. The result in either case is false conclusions regarding God’s revelation of truth (see **Figure 4**).

This is tragic. God shares facts and principles with humanity, but human beings sometimes arrive at false conclusions. Is there a remedy? The good news is that God is again proactive. He provides the “Spirit of Truth” who will guide us “into all truth” (John 16:13, KJV).<sup>28</sup> It is the role of the Holy Spirit to deflect Satan’s attempted distortions of truth and to rescue us from the false assumptions of a secular worldview. As a result, we are enabled to arrive at correct conclusions regarding God and His Truth (see **Figure 5**). The prophet Isaiah wrote: “When the

enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD will lift up a standard against him” (Isaiah 59:19). Consequently, it is essential for a Christian to invite the Holy Spirit as a partner in research.

There is an additional safeguard, however, and that is the triangulation of believers. While popularity polls do not determine truth, nevertheless “every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses” (2 Corinthians 13:1, NIV).<sup>29</sup> When the early Christian believers needed to decide which matters were essential, they came together, discussed and prayed, and under the guidance of the Spirit reached a conclusion (Acts 15:1-31). In research, it is likewise necessary that findings be replicated, that perspectives be triangulated, and that, through humble interactions, a consensus emerges among those who are committed to the biblical worldview.

### Concluding Thoughts

Research is a focused and systematic search for truth, for trustworthy knowledge and understanding. Truth, for its part, loses nothing by close examination, by careful investigation.<sup>30</sup> Further, both reason and faith can be strengthened by the scrutiny of research and refined in the crucible of empirical analysis.

On the other hand, we must acknowledge that research has inherent limitations, that not even a careful application of scientific inquiry is a guarantee of truth. Although we endeavor to safeguard the truthfulness of our conclusions, we recognize that we cannot arrive at certainty based on empirical data. We can never state, “Research has proved that . . .” or “Science has verified that . . .” Rather, we must speak in terms of evidence that “bear[s] witness to the truth” (John 18:37; see also 3 John 1:12).

We must each, therefore, model authenticity and humility. This includes recognizing the limits of our

As Christian researchers, we must interact directly with the repositories of truth, revealed through Scripture, in the person of Jesus Christ, and by the creation in each of its dimensions. Above all, we must communicate confidence in the trustworthiness of the divine revelation of Truth—a “more sure word” [2 Peter 1:19, KJV], which we do well to heed.

knowledge, being honest about our deficiencies, and expressing the tentativeness of our conclusions. It implies openness to correction and a passion for continued growth. It suggests that as believing scholars, we must come together, under the guidance of the Spirit, to build a dynamic, Word-based community in search of truth.

As Christian researchers, we must interact directly with the repositories of truth, revealed through Scripture, in the person of Jesus Christ, and by the creation in each of its dimensions. Above all, we must communicate confidence in the trustworthiness of the divine revelation of Truth—a “more sure word” (2 Peter 1:19, KJV), which we do well to heed.

There is a final matter. Paul writes, “Wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they

refused to love the truth” (2 Thessalonians 2:10). It is not enough to *know* the truth. We must *love* the truth. What does it mean to love the truth? To love the truth is to *live* the truth. We evidence that we love the truth by incorporating it into the fabric of our lives.

The result? “The truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). We do not so much need freedom to discover truth as we must reside in God’s Truth to progressively experience freedom—from error, from false assumptions, and from misplaced interpretations. Truth, in fact, offers the only freedom.

At the end of Earth’s history, God proclaims: “Open the gates that the righteous nation which keeps the truth may enter in” (Isaiah 26:2). Truth matters. ✍

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Code of Federal Regulations 5 CFR 46.102(d)*, adapted (2009): <http://ori.hhs.gov/education/products/sdsu/research.htm>. *Inquiry* indicates that we seek to answer questions, while *systematic* specifies that we approach the research process in an intentional and organized manner, using the sci-

entific approach, which often includes a sequence of phases: making initial observations, defining the problem, formulating the question, investigating the known, articulating an expectation, collecting and analyzing data, interpreting the results—particularly in reference to the expectation, reflecting on the findings, and then communicating the findings to the scientific community, as well as to society at large. The goal of *knowledge* points to the fact that we hope to describe, understand, or explain something, while the *generalizable* aspect suggests that we would like our findings to have meaning beyond the immediate, informing other scenarios. (In qualitative research, the more common terminology is *transferability*.)

2. This highlights the relationship between epistemology and metaphysics. For the Christian, however, reality takes on an added dimension—seeking to understand reality as God sees it. In this sense, truth may also be viewed as fidelity to the standard of ultimate Truth, aspects of which God has conveyed to us (see, for example, 2 Peter 1:19 to 21 and Revelation 1:1 and 2). The utilization of a standard, with its corresponding *goodness of fit*, underscores the interrelatedness of epistemology and axiology.

3. Also known as Type I and II errors in statistical hypothesis testing. An example of a “false positive” (Type I error) would be a lab result that indicates that a patient has a certain disease, when he or she does not, in reality, have the disease. Conversely, a “false negative” (Type II error) would be a lab result that indicates that a patient does not have the disease, when, in fact, he or she does.

4. Unless indicated otherwise, all biblical passages in this article are quoted from the *New King James Version* (NKJV). Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. All rights reserved.

5. Many of these expressions are representative of various theories of truth, such as Consensus (“everyone agrees”), Constructivist (“it’s been my experience”), Coherence (“it fits together beautifully”), and Pragmatic (“it works”).

6. Emotion can also degenerate into mere wish fulfillment: “This simply must be true because I like it/want it to be.” We must recognize, nevertheless, that emotion does play a vital role in our lives. If we accept that truth is relational, then it must include emotive components. Antonio Damasio, in *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon Books, 1994) proposes, in fact, that the human brain does not allow rational inquiry without involving the emotional centers of the brain.

7. Furthermore, is it possible to force the evidence? By persistent blows, might we metaphorically drive a square peg through a round hole?

8. Similarly, we can recognize limitations in other positions.

*Popularity*: Is the majority always right? There was a time when all but eight people believed that it could never rain (1 Peter 3:20). At another time, nearly everyone believed in spontaneous generation, until Louis Pasteur (1822-1895) performed his experiments demonstrating that life can come only from life. If we rely on opinion polls to confirm truth, we would run the risk of following the whims of the masses or of the group making the most noise.

*Instinct*: Thomas Jefferson, as primary author of the United States Declaration of Independence, wrote that “all men are created equal” (1776) and called this idea “self-evident.” The concept, however, was not evident in the same way to King George of England or to Jefferson’s friends who were slaveholders, or even to Jefferson himself, also a slaveholder. A deeper problem with the “follow your heart” approach is that Jeremiah describes our hearts as deceitful and naturally inclined toward error (Jeremiah 17:9). How, then, could our instincts be an infallible guide?

*Pragmatism*: Something may indeed work well, but is it necessarily correct just because it works? While deceptive advertising may be effective, at least in terms of short-term sales, that does not make it acceptable.

*Logic*: In a syllogism, the truthfulness of the conclusion depends on the truthfulness of the premises, which are often difficult, if not impossible, to test. Without assurance that our assumptions are true, logic could become a way of going wrong with confidence. Conversely, just because something does not seem logical (perhaps because we do not understand it), this does not preclude it from being true. Scripture, for example, presents affirmations that seem to defy human logic: “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10, NKJV). “Having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Corinthians 6:10, NIV). “Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:35, NIV). Quoted from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by International Bible Society.

9. “‘We don’t know, Lord,’ Thomas said. ‘We have no idea where You are going, so how can we know the way?’” (John 14:5, NLT). Quoted from *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, Copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

10. The Bible, for example, speaks positively regarding several of these criteria: *Tradition*: “‘Ask the former generations. Find out what their fathers learned’” (Job 8:8, NIV). *Popularity*: “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14, NKJV; also 15:22). *Logic*: “[Jesus] answered and said to them, ‘When it is evening you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red”; and in the morning, “It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.” Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times’” (Matthew 16:2, 3; also, 10:29, 31, NKJV; and Acts 18:4). *Coherence*: “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11, NIV).

11. In this Correspondence or Empirical Theory approach, assertions of truth are compared with evidence of reality, at least as we perceive it. In a 2009 survey of philosophy faculty members and philosophy PhD holders, for example, 48.9 percent of the 1,803 respondents accepted or leaned toward Correspondence Theory, as opposed to 23.0 percent toward Deflationary, 10.9 percent toward Epistemic, and 17.2 percent toward other truth theories (<https://philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl>).

12. Numbers 13 and 14 describes a situation wherein 12 persons reviewed the same evidence, but two arrived at a conclusion quite different from that of the other 10.

13. Karl Popper, one of the great philosophers of science in the 20th century, argued that proof can be claimed only if an experiment is repeated an infinite number of times under all possible circumstances. In *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge, 1992), page 32, Popper stated: “The game of science is, in principle, without end. He who decides one day that scientific statements do not call for any further test, and that they can be regarded as finally verified, retires from the game.” See also Popper’s discussion of white swans and black swans on pages 33 and 83. Available at <http://s-f-walker.org.uk/pubsebooks/pdfs/popper-logic-scientific-discovery.pdf>. The conclusion is that certainty of any proposi-

tion is simply unattainable from the human perspective. Researchers thus speak in terms of possibilities and probabilities.

14. See Exodus 34:6; Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 31:5; and Psalm 25:10.

15. Also, Hebrews 13:8. We must be cautious, however, when asserting God's unchangeableness that we do not view Him as one locked in infinity, unmoved by circumstances that we may experience. Rather, God is "touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Hebrews 4:15, KJV). While it may be difficult for us to comprehend, God's immutability and His imminence are coexistent.

16. Consequently, human beings cannot destroy Truth. We can only choose to accept or reject God's Truth. The fact that Truth cannot be destroyed also suggests that those who have accepted it do not need to shift into crisis mode simply because Truth has been attacked.

17. For instance, Psalm 100:5 states that God's Truth "endures to all generations" (NKJV). This does not mean that the *application* of truth cannot vary depending on the context, but rather that Truth, in its *principle*, is universal. Were we to visit Asia, for example, we would be expected to remove our shoes before entering a holy place. In some other places, however, the removing of shoes in a church service would be considered improper. Which position is correct? Both are contextualized expressions of the same principle—namely, that one should show reverence to God. Similarly, research may help identify overarching theories, but the application of those principles, as seen in the findings of a study, may suggest variance depending on time, place, and population.

18. "When I thought how to understand this," David wrote, "it was too painful for me" (Psalm 73:16, NKJV).

19. Similarly, when the prophet Daniel received a vision regarding 2,300 days until the sanctuary should be cleansed (Daniel 8:14), he was deeply troubled. "I, Daniel, fainted and was sick for days. . . . I was astonished by the vision, but no one understood it" (8:27, NKJV). Investigating other time periods in Scripture, he encountered the period of 70 years of Jewish captivity foretold by the prophet Jeremiah (9:1-3). This brought greater consternation, as it seemed that the period of captivity was to be greatly extended (based on the day/year principle), and this led to Daniel's prayer of corporate repentance (9:4-19). In response

to this prayer, the angel Gabriel, who had spoken of the 2,300 days, returned and said, "O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you skill to understand. . . . Therefore, consider the matter, and understand the vision" (9:22, 23 NKJV). Then Gabriel again spoke of time periods. In all, evidence that human understanding of truth can be progressive.

20. Take, for example, the belief that the Earth is the center of the universe. The geocentric model was the dominant explanation of the cosmos in many, if not most, ancient civilizations, and was advocated by Plato, Aristotle, and Ptolemy, among others. Copernicus provided the first serious challenge to the Earth-centered model when he published his work, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* in 1543, proposing that the planets, including the Earth, revolved around the Sun. Christians, by and large, had accepted the pervading geocentric model and buttressed that position with certain biblical passages (e.g., Joshua 10:12, 13; Habakkuk 3:11, 12; Psalm 19:4-6; Ecclesiastes 1:5). Indeed, when the Copernican theory was proposed, it was argued that this view contradicted Scripture, or more accurately, the constructed misinterpretation of Scripture (see Barry Brundell, "The New Atheism: Some Pre-history," *Compass* 47:4 [Summer 2013]: 30-35).

21. Beyond those unknowns that touch the circumference of our circle of knowledge, we don't even know that we don't know!

22. The concept that "all truth is God's truth" was noted by Frank Gaebel in *The Pattern of God's Truth: The Integration of Faith and Learning* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1954) and championed by Arthur Holmes in *All Truth Is God's Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977). Augustine, however, had earlier supported this idea in his work *On Christian Doctrine* (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2010), chapter 18: "Let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master."

23. Biblical statements regarding deceit and misrepresentation are first expressed in the context of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16, 17; 3:4), and culminate with the destruction of Satan, the archdeceiver (Revelation 20:3).

24. *The Holy Bible, New International Version*.

25. Divine revelation includes both special revelation (the Scriptures) and general revelation (God's created works). Consequently, both Scripture and the creation (including human beings) are avenues intentionally used by God to communicate

truth (see, for example, the discussion of both general and special revelation in Psalm 19). We should note, however, that the primary purpose for God's revelation through nature was to convey knowledge about Himself and His plan for the creation. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork" (Psalm 19:1, NKJV; also Psalm 97:6; Acts 14:15-17). God has placed sufficient evidence in His created works that any person, regardless of training or experience, can acquire the essential understanding of God: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse" (Romans 1:20, NKJV).

26. Anselm, in the *Proslogion*, states: "I seek not to understand in order that I may believe; but I believe in order that I may understand. For this also I believe, namely, that unless I believe I shall not understand" (*Biblioteca Sacra*, 8:537). Consequently, all persons live by faith, regardless of their worldview, as there are always fundamental assumptions that cannot be tested by reason, research, or reflection to the point of certainty. The matter, ultimately, is in what, or in whom, will we place our faith.

27. The slave girl's assertion, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation" (Acts 16:17, NKJV) was true. Why, then, did Paul utter his rebuke? Simply because the devil was endeavoring to distort God's Truth. The inhabitants of Philippi knew this woman well—she "brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling" (vs. 16). As the woman seemed to know these strangers and was providing pro bono marketing services "for many days" (vs. 18), people could falsely conclude that they belonged to the same endeavor.

28. See 1 John 5:6 and 1 Corinthians 2:6-16.

29. Also Proverbs 15:22 and 2 Peter 1:20.

30. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville: Southern Publ. Assn., 1946) 35.

# When a School Board Member Goes "ROGUE"



**A**lthough Seventh-day Adventist school boards have significant power to influence the schools under their care, they are not independent entities. They are guided by policies created and developed by local conferences, unions, and divisions, and are required to comply with their terms.<sup>1</sup> However, there are certain scenarios for which limited or little guidance is given. One such scenario is the “rogue” board member. According to the North American Division’s (NAD) *Manual for School Boards of Seventh-day Adventist Schools*: “In instances where working policies of the local conference, union, or division are silent, the local school board is guided by the school’s philosophy and mission statement.”<sup>2</sup>

To “go rogue” means to act independently, erratically, and without concern for established protocols. According to Fuglei, “school boards with single or multiple members who work behind closed doors”<sup>3</sup> to ignore the wishes of their constituents, or who choose to ignore the counsel of their oversight bodies—which in the case of Adventist K-12 schools are

the local conference or union of office of education and divisions at the higher education level—can cause enormous damage. Rogue school board members can “run roughshod over the norms and standards of behavior expected”<sup>4</sup> of people appointed or elected to this office. These rogue members disregard best practices of school board membership, and in short, elevate their own interests and those of their friends over those of the schools and institutions they are called to serve.

Vick provides another definition, characterizing rogue board members as people who use “their authority outside the jurisdiction of the board as a whole. Often their actions are no longer serving the better good of the organization but instead are based on a personal agenda and what they feel is ‘right’ for the organization.”<sup>5</sup>

School board members who display these types of behaviors “interfere with a school’s ability to serve its students and constituency.”<sup>6</sup> Fuglei further identifies several ways such rogue school board members are able to accomplish this. They include the following behaviors:

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BY ROBERT D. CRUX

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- “Disregarding ideas from the school superintendent;
- Behaving counter to written (or unwritten) rules of conduct;
- Supporting policies that are not in students’ best interests;
- Making inappropriate deals with faculty, or other board members, in exchange for favors;
- Breaching the board’s code of ethics.”<sup>7</sup>

At the K-12 level, the local pastor and school board chairperson can play a pivotal role in correcting, restraining, and if necessary, facilitating removal of rogue school board members for inappropriate behaviors. Sadly, situations occur when it does not seem politically expedient for the pastor, the school board chairperson (at times, even the education superintendent or union/division director of education) to intervene due to the power and influence certain rogue school board members possess in their local church/school community.

In situations such as these, the whole school program is put at risk, and the reputation of Adventist education suffers. Ultimately, those that suffer the most are the students, parents, and teachers of the school. Parents end up enrolling their children in another school, and teachers may transfer to another job location due to the dysfunctional chain of authority and an unclear, and possibly compromised, mission of the school.

School boards can take measures to curtail and even prevent such scenarios from happening by ensuring that all members are committed to the educational and spiritual mission of the school and to the board’s established code of ethics, and by confirming that members understand their role as being part of a team. Board chairs can also be intentional in stating and upholding the requirements for board membership, along with cultivating a climate of servant leadership. While these steps may not prevent all rogue behavior by members, they will help school boards and their constituencies to be more vigilant in exercising care in selecting and electing members who will contribute to the school’s growth and success (see Box 1).

### **Board members must embrace and support the mission of the school.**

Each school needs a clear, written mission statement. This will allow

new school board members to clearly comprehend the direction of the institution. More importantly, it will help prospective members decide if they want to align their own ideas and vision for the school with its stated mission before accepting the invitation to join the board. Board members become more effective participants in the governance of the institution when they understand that they will be held accountable for upholding the educational and spiritual mission of the school.

Knowing where the school is going encourages board members to be on the same page when it comes to knowing what to do, when, and why. Further, when it comes to shaping strategies and planning improvements for the school,

## **Box 1. Seventh-day Adventist School Board Membership Structure**

Seventh-day Adventist school boards consist of regular and ex-officio members. Whether K-12 or higher education, a regular or ex-officio member of an Adventist school board must be a regular member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Others may serve in an advisory role only.

### **K-12 School Boards<sup>1</sup>**

At this level, each member elected by a constituent church, the principal, and the Home and School Association leader should have his or her membership in a constituent church.

*Regular members:* Typically, at least two members selected from each constituent church (and elected by the constituent churches). This includes one pastor from each constituent church. Additional members should be elected by constituent churches in accordance with the school’s constitution or working policies.

*Ex-officio members:* Typically, the principal and vice principal(s) of the school (day or boarding); the Home and School Association leader (especially if a day school); the superintendent of schools (or designate) for the local conference; the director of education (or designate) for the union conference; and the elected officers of the local conference.

### **Higher Education<sup>2</sup>**

According to the *General Conference Working Policy on Education*, “Subject to applicable civil laws and regulations, members of the governing boards of Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities shall be members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in regular standing. Others may serve in advisory capacities” (Working Policy FE 20 10).

Members on higher education boards are comprised of representatives from the church’s organizations such as the General Conference, division presidents, conference presidents within each division, directors of education, and individuals who represent a cross-section of the constituency served by the institution (*Working Policy FE 20 10*). Other members are individuals who are not employed by the institution and have no family members employed by, or conducting business with, the institution. Some institutions also require that a specified percentage of the board be lay members.

### **REFERENCES**

1. *Inter-American Division School Board Manual for Secondary Schools* (2002): <http://circle.adventist.org/files/download/IADSecondaryBoardManual02.pdf>; *North American Division School Board Manual* (2018): [https://nad-bigtincan.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/leadership%20resources/administration/handbooks%20%26%20manuals/SchoolBoard\\_Manual.pdf](https://nad-bigtincan.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/leadership%20resources/administration/handbooks%20%26%20manuals/SchoolBoard_Manual.pdf).
2. General Conference *Working Policy FE 20 10* (2018); AAA, “Governing Board Autonomy, Independence, and Accountability in Colleges and Universities—Guidelines” (2018): [https://adventistaccreditin-gassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/governing\\_board\\_autonomy\\_independence\\_and\\_accountability.pdf](https://adventistaccreditin-gassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/governing_board_autonomy_independence_and_accountability.pdf).

using the mission statement as a primary reference point empowers each board member to serve more effectively and efficiently.

### **Board members must adhere to a code of ethics.**

A code of ethics outlines the expectations and ethical principles that should guide each board member's behavior. This standard should be upheld by all who serve. The degree to which members adhere to the code of ethics can and should be evaluated. This is just as important as the evaluations of teachers and administrators. Creating a conference/union policy that supports board member evaluations is essential to controlling rogue board members.<sup>8</sup> If no such policy exists, the board can seek counsel on creating one for local application.

At the K-12 level, the superintendent of education and conference administration can also assist with making accountability a priority, and at the higher education level, board chairs and college/university presidents can work together to provide training and board education.<sup>9</sup> This can be done by making school board training webinars and other professional-development resources available to school boards to assist them in evaluating and reviewing their roles and responsibilities, as well as informing them about who to consult should problems arise. As boards learn what is expected of them and participate in their own evaluations, they will collectively learn to self-correct poor behaviors—or at least maintain a record of such.

Unfortunately, due to the level of scrutiny and/or commitment of time and resources demanded of board members, it can be a challenge in Seventh-day Adventist communities to find people willing to serve on school boards. This should not be an excuse to let dysfunctional behaviors continue or to refrain from holding school board members accountable to adhere to a code of ethics. School boards must not rationalize that: “he or she means well”; “we need his or her skills”; “we don’t want to offend him or her”; or “we’ll have a hard time finding anyone else to serve.” Instead, they must never be afraid or hesitant to enforce the procedures outlined in the constitution and bylaws of the institution (or of the conference, union, or division) for removing one or more rogue school members. As always, consultation with the legal counsel for the institution’s parent organization is strongly recommended before any action is taken.

### **Effective school board members understand that they are part of a team.**

Board service is a team sport. According to Fuglei, “Generally speaking, a school board’s purpose is to facilitate the business of a school”<sup>10</sup> under the guidelines and policies of the entities that provide oversight, which for Adventist schools would be the local conference and union K-12 education codebook, or the recommendations for setting guidelines at higher education institutions.<sup>11</sup> Board members act on behalf of the constituents of the school, and “although they may represent different points of view, it is essential for individuals on the school board to work in harmony with

each other as well as with administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders of the school.”<sup>12</sup>

Vick clarifies that being part of a team helps ensure that the board has a strategic plan and is able to stay focused on mission. Role descriptions and terms of reference are provided for each incoming school board member. The school constitution and bylaws are reviewed on a consistent basis to provide clear parameters of operation. The review should include the process for how to deal with rogue board members. (If no such process exists, one should be created.) Finally, a strong board-development committee can ensure a team approach by focusing on recruitment, training, and mentoring school board members.<sup>13</sup>

Effective school boards have a purposeful and collaborative relationship with the school’s administration, faculty, and staff, and with the community. They are able to “establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving the goals and mission of the school.”<sup>14</sup> For school boards, this means actively involving the community and school personnel in setting goals and updating the school’s strategic plan. It means building a team that has clearly defined roles and responsibilities in the work the board proposes to do.

The strategy of employing board subcommittees and ad hoc committees to accomplish specific projects and tasks creates opportunities for collaboration with school faculty, staff, and community. Each committee should be guided by a “terms of reference” document (developed by the board in formal session) to help expedite its work and keep it on task. Using the faculty, staff, and community as consultants for this type of working structure also provides a variety of perspectives for the board to consider, with the possibility of creating stronger relationships both internally and externally.

Since the board usually has limited contact with the school staff and faculty, its members should consider how to obtain information and communicate it in a purposeful and positive manner. Scheduling regular meetings with the faculty and staff to provide in-depth briefings on policy changes/decisions will better control both the incoming and outgoing information flow and can serve as a team-building event and opportunity to bond and celebrate the successes of the school. Having clear goals for such meetings with built-in opportunities for listening and problem-solving will not only help to unify, but also reduce the potential of these meetings becoming grievance sessions. Creating a culture for effective communication with school personnel will help to limit the rogue member’s promotion of his or her own agenda in the school and community.

These types of communication and working structures (outlined above) can be effective ways to involve and inform various stakeholders of the school and mitigate the more-objectionable traits of a potential rogue member. Involving stakeholders in the goals and strategic plans of the school, as well as using communication structures that better control the information flow, will help prevent the board from being distracted by the personal agendas of individual members.

Crucial to the success of any school program is the ability

of the school board chair to manage conflict. If the chair seeks to avoid conflict rather than address it, or mishandles conflict, this could cause long-term consequences and damage to the school. Understanding what is expected from everyone at the beginning of a project/task and communicating how the work will be accomplished will save a lot of time, in-fighting, and missed opportunities to advance the educational program of the school. How boards conduct business is as important as the business they conduct.

Being part of a team includes supporting the chair in removing obstacles that hinder the work of the board. Therefore, when it comes to managing a rogue member of the board, the chair needs to have voted protocols and procedures in place to guide him or her. The chair should first communicate individually with the rogue member, soliciting his or her full support of the board's code of ethics and the role and responsibilities of board members as outlined in the school's constitution/bylaws. As a next step (if necessary), the chair and another school board official (pastor, superintendent of education, or ex officio member of the board) should meet with the rogue member to request compliance with the adopted code of ethics and/or the school constitution and bylaws that specifically relate to school board membership. Should these steps fail to obtain the cooperation and compliance of the rogue member, the chair must consider the person's removal from board membership. Removal could include recommending that the individual resign, take a leave of absence, or for egregious offenses, be removed by an official vote. The process for executing each of these options should be clearly outlined in the board's constitution and bylaws, and records of all communication and efforts to resolve the situation should be carefully documented and stored. Most importantly, board chairs facilitating this process should consult and work closely with legal counsel to ensure that all involved are given due process.

Canosa has provided best-practice guidance when considering the removal of a board member. He indicates that "removal of a member from the board is a very serious matter and should never be taken lightly. At times, however, such a step must be considered."<sup>15</sup> The circumstances or reasons that Canosa deems appropriate for removal are:

- "Prolonged non-attendance.
- Unethical, disruptive, or obstructive behavior that prevents the board from proceeding with its work or threatens its credibility.
- Profound conflict of interest.
- Breach of confidentiality or covenant.
- Any individual member action, not authorized by the vote of the board, that creates legal jeopardy for the board as a whole and/or the organization it serves."<sup>16</sup>

Due to the relationships and positions that board members may hold on other committees or offices at the church/conference/union levels, the removal of a rogue school board member can create tension between the person and the policy and become a severe test of loyalty for not only the board chair but also members of the board. This scenario can easily become clouded with shades of gray

blocking out the sunshine and transparency of sound policies that can offer guidance. Boards should carefully consider what is written in their constitution and bylaws and seek legal counsel before taking any drastic action. Rogue members should never be enabled because of their position, power, and influence over other board members.

### **School boards must be intentional about upholding requisites for membership.**

Otten shares specific protocols to which school board chairpersons and executive committees should pay particular attention when dealing with incoming school board members. These guidelines can be shared by education superintendents or directors of education with those who elect and appoint board members to service (e.g., constituencies or organizations), increasing the likelihood of selecting individuals who understand their roles and can work as part of a team. Here are a few of them:

1. Make sure potential board members understand and embrace the school's mission and core values. If a school has not identified these, then they should be defined and adopted immediately.
2. Provide immediate orientation about the institution and the role of the board in serving the institution. A clear description of what is expected of each board member or trustee decreases the chances of having someone try to implement a personal agenda.
3. Carefully consider the personality of those nominated for election or appointment. While skills and expertise are important, the individual's temperament, willingness to serve, and ability to work well with others are absolutely crucial to building a team that can collaborate to accomplish goals.
4. Commit to annual evaluations of individual and collective board performance.
5. Uphold term limits as established by guiding policies as a way to prevent any one member from feeling as though he or she owns the position. Term limits for members, if instituted, must be enforced.<sup>17</sup>

Each of the above recommendations should be carefully and consistently implemented. School board chairpersons must be intentional about upholding requisites for board membership, and as often as possible, take the opportunity to carefully assess how well each member fits in with the current board membership, mission, and goals.

### **Effective school board members are servant leaders.**

School board members are called to be servant leaders. Committed board members recognize that their service is not to be driven by a desire for power, but instead by a commitment to serve and to extend the mission of Adventist education as a ministry.<sup>18</sup> Robert Greenleaf in *The Power of Servant Leadership* describes it this way: "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant—first to make sure that other people's priority needs are being served."<sup>19</sup>

Esther Dewitt, president of Conflict Navigation, observes



## Sidebar 1. How Boards Can Avoid Being Derailed by the Difficult Board Member

that people-oriented servant leaders can effectively lead people toward embracing shared goals, enabling them to accomplish mission-driven tasks.<sup>20</sup> According to Dewitt, servant leaders:

- **Listen.** They understand the value of letting others speak; and recognize that there is wisdom in listening to the ideas, fears, concerns, and aspirations of those in their care.

- **Empathize.** Servant leaders are able to sensitively identify with and enter into the experiences of others and are keenly aware of how their decisions will impact those they serve and lead.

- **Persuade.** Instead of using their authority to demand or force others to comply, servant leaders understand the power of persuasion to motivate others toward shared goals.

- **Model integrity.** Servant leaders build and maintain relationships based on trust and integrity. They model adherence to shared standards within their institutions.

- **Help people grow.** Through coaching and mentoring, servant leaders nurture others within their respective institutions. They understand that investing in people will grow their institutions and create a path to success.

- **Build community.** Relationships are important to servant leaders, and they seek to cultivate an institutional culture that values and respects individuals, cooperation, and teamwork.<sup>21</sup>

Servant leadership is hard work and does not come naturally to most leaders and members of a school board. This leadership style may be viewed by some as revealing a lack of strength and an inability to make tough decisions. However, if we are to follow the example of Christ (consider what the apostle Paul wrote about Christ's humility in Philippians 2:3-8, NKJV), we must observe

Boards are designed to function with one voice. Yet, as with any group of dissimilar people, there are times when board members will disagree. A skilled board chair will manage multiple opinions by guiding the discussion, using organizational tools such as *Robert's Rules of Order*, and providing non-confrontational ways of getting each member to share his or her perspective on the journey to achieve consensus. Additional ways to prevent difficulties include having a clear mission, making sure board members understand their individual and collective roles, abiding by the constitution and bylaws, and nurturing a culture of training and mentoring of new members.<sup>1</sup>

However, even with all these preventative measures in place, it is still possible to experience difficulties with one or more board members. What happens when a board member "goes rogue" by taking an action independent of the collective group? What if a member aggressively pushes a personal agenda or loudly criticizes other members of the board or the chair, becoming a "board bully"? What if a member discloses confidential information discussed by the board or has a serious conflict of interest? What recourse do boards have in these situations? Here are a few helpful suggestions for board chairs:

1. **Identify the source of the conflict and address it immediately.**<sup>2</sup> Matthew 18:15 to 17 gives biblical counsel for dealing with conflict. The first step is for the chair to speak with the person directly in a non-confrontational way. This includes listening carefully to what is being said, both verbally and non-verbally. Does the individual have a legitimate concern but appears unaware of his or her effect on other people? What is the true source of the conflict? Next, investigate. Did something happen that the individual perceives as a slight? Is this type of behavior atypical or also displayed in other areas of this individual's work? Squelch the temptation to judge the individual's actions, and make an effort to engage him or her in dialogue. As one author said, "An engaged dissenter is often of much greater value than an unengaged yes-man [or woman]."<sup>3</sup> If the situation is not resolved at the individual level, then it may be necessary for the board chair to involve another trusted colleague and follow any protocols already in place, being careful to document any actions taken.

2. **Curtail the conflict immediately.** As much as possible, the chair should keep the conflict contained between those involved, resisting the urge to take the issue to the entire body. However, if the rest of the board (and/or the school family and community) already know about the conflict, the chair must not sweep the issue under the carpet. If it is already out in the open, he or she needs to address it, employing clear discussion protocols to keep the issue contained. The chair should consult with key advisors (e.g., public-relations experts, legal counsel, and those knowledgeable about how to manage social media) on how best to do this. When the board as a whole addresses these types of problems, it must make every effort to speak as a unified voice and to project strength. It is important to respond to the situation with facts, honesty, and transparency.

3. **Remove or isolate the difficult board member.** Despite the board's best efforts, it may be that removing the board member is the only option. The board chair should consult the constitution and bylaws regarding what actions the board can take, and most importantly, seek legal counsel before taking any drastic action. If there are no provisions for removing a board member, then the board must find a way to work with the individual. This may mean minimizing his or her role or responsibilities. If a board member is genuinely unhappy, then he or she should be encouraged to resign.

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how a life of humility allowed Him to connect with people, resulting in positive change(s). If school board chairs and members purposely dedicate some time during their meetings to sharing what servant leadership means to them individually, this can be a purposeful way to reflect and refocus, and to build consensus on how the board should carry out its work.

School board meetings must advance and promote the mission and philosophy of the school. Each meeting should begin with prayer requesting the presence of the Holy Spirit so that members can be prompted and inspired to focus on those key issues that will enhance the school's academic and spiritual-life program. Leading with prayer will also help set the tone of the meeting and enable the Holy Spirit to influence the hearts and minds of members to be divinely motivated for unselfish service. Consider the following words:

"Let those who attend committee meetings remember they are meeting with God, who has given them their work. Let them come together with reverence and consecration of heart. They meet to consider important matters connected with the Lord's cause. In every particular, their actions are to show they are desirous of understanding His will in regard to the plan to be laid for the advancement of His work."<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

Local church congregations and conference, union, and division constituencies have placed an enormous degree of confidence and reliance in those appointed to serve as school board members and trustees. They believe in their school board and expect integrity in return. Board members, in turn, must be accountable to the educational mission of the school and to a code of ethics. Further, board members must understand that they are part of a team and should be committed to servant leadership. With effective policies in place, boards can establish a spirit of teamwork and limit the degree to which any single member or group of members manages to go rogue. ✍

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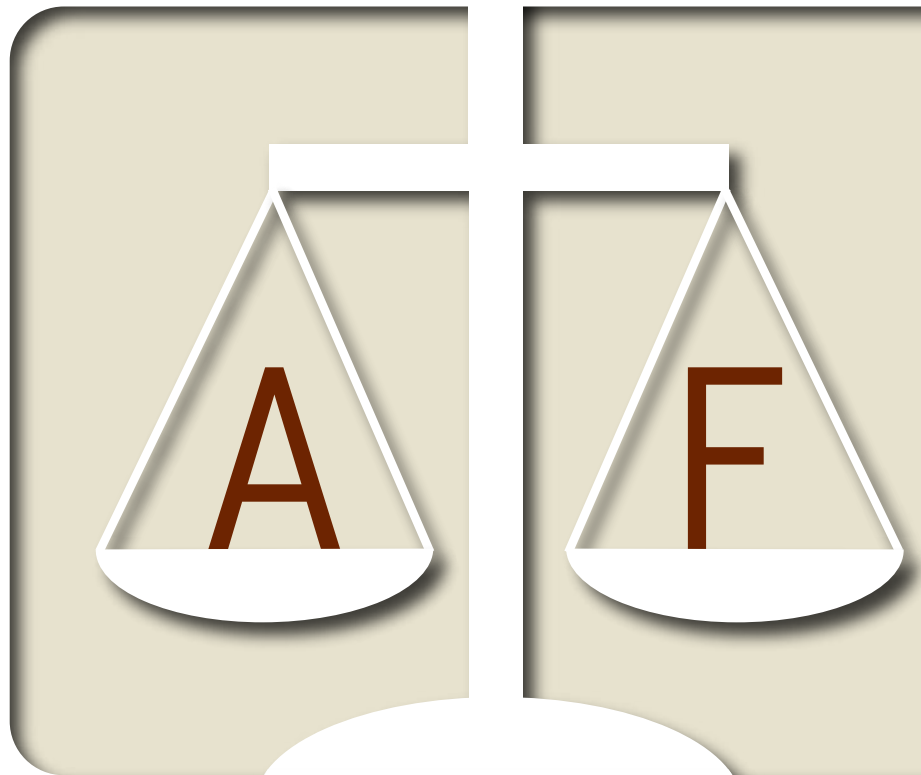
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Jerome Thayer

# Balancing Justice and Mercy in Classroom Assessment and Grading



**A**t the end of each term or grading period, teachers are frequently approached by students asking: “What can I do to raise my grade?” They perceive that if justice is applied, they will get a poor grade, and they are asking for mercy. A justice-oriented teacher is likely to reply: “You will get the grade you deserve—based on the quality of your work for the class.” Students in church schools who view the teacher as a model of Christian behavior come away from this encounter with a perception of

God as One who sternly administers justice.

On the other hand, a mercy-oriented teacher is likely to reply: “Here are a few things that you can do to raise your grade.” Students come away from this encounter with a perception of God as Someone who can be manipulated into granting favors.

After a few of these encounters, both teachers and students come to dread the grading process. While teachers must adhere to grading policies set by their school administration, conference, or state, they can make decisions regarding how

best to apply these policies. How can a Christian teacher balance both justice and mercy appropriately in grading?

Many teachers and students have a negative view of assessment-related activities such as assignments, quizzes, exams, and grades. Many teachers feel frustrated during assessment activities and guilty after completing them. Similarly, there are students who do not think the assessment-related activities are fair and do not see any benefit from them—they think such activities are handled vindic-

tively and with little mercy, viewing them as extrinsic motivators.<sup>1</sup>

In order for classroom assessment and grading procedures to be positive, fair, and accurate, teachers need a new framework to inform their assessment practices. In this article, I propose that teachers in Christian learning environments discover principles to use as a basis for their assessments and grading that are based on how God uses assessment—how

Many times, teachers will over-emphasize the justice aspect of grading to the detriment of mercy or vice versa. The goal of this article is to suggest principles that will enable a teacher to maximize both justice and mercy in the grading process.

He deals with humans when making salvation decisions related to them. I will propose a framework within which assessment can be positive for both teachers and students. This framework will include suggestions for balancing both justice and mercy, and it will also recommend broad principles that can be applied by teachers in their assessment planning and decisions. I will primarily focus on one assessment task—how data

should be used in decisions related to assigning grades. Many of the grading decisions that are informed by assessment data will be examined, and principles will be suggested that can be used to guide these decisions.<sup>2</sup>

Justice is maximized if grades are based on appropriate data that can be used, with a minimum level of subjectivity, to measure students' achievement or performance related to clearly specified, appropriate outcomes, objectives, or standards. Mercy is maximized if assessment is conducted during the learning process to aid learning, and grading decisions are based on data collected in a way that takes into consideration individual differences and circumstances.

Many times, teachers will over-emphasize the justice aspect of grading to the detriment of mercy or vice versa. The goal of this article is to suggest principles that will enable a teacher to maximize both justice and mercy in the grading process.

#### How God Uses Assessment

It is clear from Scripture that God does not avoid assessment (Genesis 1; Psalm 19:2-24; Romans 12:1-8). The decisions God makes related to human salvation will be based on His assessment of how each individual has met the "criteria" specified in Scripture. While there may be disagreement over what the criterion or criteria might be, it is clear that God does not make salvation-related decisions in a casual, subjective, or non-documented manner. Seventh-day Adventists believe that human beings who are saved will spend the millennium reviewing God's records to confirm that salvation-related decisions were made appropriately (Daniel 7:22; 1 Corinthians 6: 2, 3; Revelation 20:4, 6). It is not clear what types of data are contained in the "book of life," but it appears as if the data are the bases for God's decisions—and after examining these records, the righteous will con-

clude that God is just and merciful.

Teachers should not view evaluation and assessment as activities to be avoided if possible. Evaluation and assessment of students' knowledge and skill levels provide them with objectives for their specified fields of study and for living as productive citizens, and equip teachers with information about how well students are meeting objectives. Failure to appropriately assess and evaluate increases the possibility of sending into society individuals who are ill-prepared to effectively serve and unlikely to succeed in life. Since important decisions are made based on how well students are meeting the objectives of the class or school in which they are enrolled, it is important that evaluation and assessment be done in an appropriate and defensible manner.

The following section describes ways in which God handles assessment in salvation-related decisions and provides examples of how teachers might model their assessment-related decisions on how God acts in similar situations. These examples are shared with the understanding that teachers and students are human beings, born in and shaped by sin (Psalm 51:5), and even with careful, consistent, and thorough application of the principles of God's kingdom on earth, failure frequently occurs (Ecclesiastes 7:20). And although falling short of the ideal is inevitable, there is assurance that grace and mercy abound even more when teachers and students follow the command of the Master Teacher, Jesus Christ, to forgive each other (Micah 7:18, 19; Ephesians 4:32).

#### God Uses Appropriate Standards

1. *God uses a criterion-referenced standard.* We are saved by grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8). This standard is one that all can



## Grace



meet. God does not use a norm-referenced standard (grading on the curve). People are not given eternal life just because they are closer to the standard than other people. Our confidence in being saved should not be based on comparing ourselves to others.

God does not hesitate to save if the standard is met (e.g., a faith relationship with Jesus Christ). Likewise, teachers need not hesitate to give “A” grades to all students if they all meet the standard set for them (e.g., work completed on time, high scores on tests and assignments, etc.).

Norm-referenced grading is seldom an appropriate way to grade (2 Corinthians 10:12; Galatians 1:10; Galatians 6:4). God does not grade off the best (highest-scoring) person who has performed the most good works (Romans 11:6; Galatians 2:16) when making salvation-related decisions. Likewise, the standard human teachers set for meeting class objectives should not depend on the performance of the highest-scoring student.

2. *God clearly specifies the standard He will use for salvation decisions.* Salvation is a gift (Ephesians 2:8, 9). However, to receive that gift, one must believe in God (Acts 16:31), accept the gift (Romans 10:9), and embrace the principles of God’s kingdom (Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 22:36-40).

Teachers should make it clear to students what they are expected to do to meet the objectives of the class. Students should not be surprised when they see course content and test questions, or when they receive their grades.

3. *God does not use different standards for different people* (Romans 3:23). All humans are saved by faith and faith alone. How faith is evaluated for people with different backgrounds and cultures will be understood only after the Second Coming.

Teachers should not have different standards for different students

unless it is determined (by the school) that a student is unable to meet the specified standard, in which case a documented adjustment of the standard (e.g., an Individualized Education Program) is made for that student. God uses abundant mercy throughout the learning and assessment process, which may vary from person to person, but He does not adjust the standard for the final salvation-related decision: It is a gift (Romans 8:1-4). It is best for teachers to use mercy in setting an appropriate standard that can be met by all students.

4. *God uses appropriate data as the basis for salvation decisions.* He bases His salvation decisions on data that are recorded and will one day be examined (Revelation 20:1-15). The book of life contains data that God will use to make salvation decisions. During the millennium, the redeemed will examine this data to confirm that correct decisions were made.<sup>3</sup>

Teachers should keep careful record of their assessments and assign grades based on recorded documentation. They should not hesitate to explain to students or parents the reason for the grades given, based on the recorded documentation.

5. *God does not base salvation decisions on limited, selective data* (Revelation 20:12).<sup>4</sup> It appears that the book of life contains many entries for each person (Revelation 20:1-15).

It is beneficial for teachers to assess outcomes from different perspectives (e.g., self-assessment and teacher assessment). Teachers should not shy away from conducting frequent assessments. It is usually not advisable to base grades solely on assessment done at one point in time (e.g., a single exam at the end of the grading period).

6. *God does not consider participation or involvement in learning-enhancing activities as a basis for salvation decisions* (Romans 3:20-30; Romans 11:6). He uses the outcome that occurs as the result of the activi-

ties or the motivation behind the activities. For example, God does not consider how often a person prays but assesses the motivation or result of the prayers (the person's relationship with Him). God encourages prayer, but prayer (e.g., works) without the resulting faith (relationship) is not sufficient (Ephesians 2:8).

There are many actions (activities) that teachers want to encourage or

Teachers should encourage and reward effort, but not by including effort in grades. Grades should be based on the degree to which the standard has been met by students based on the level of instruction provided to help them meet the outcome.

require that are needed or helpful for learning. These include things such as class attendance, participation, outside reading, or going on field trips. Although worthy and helpful activities, unless performing them produces the actual outcome desired, only the learning that results from the activity should be used for grading. For example, rather than grading on the time invested or number of

pages read for outside reading, the students could be graded on the quality of a written assignment (e.g., an essay) based on the reading. However, in some classes, such as a music ensemble or physical education class, participation in the activities could be considered to be an appropriate proxy for the actual learning that is occurring.

7. *God does not consider "irrelevant" behaviors* (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, status, etc.) *present in the assessment* (Psalm 51; Matthew 11:28; John 6:37). He listens and responds to the motivation and results of the prayers of the faithful without considering the sophistication of the prayer.<sup>5</sup>

Teachers should not take off points for "style" if this is not an objective of the course. In most subjects or classes, spelling and grammar are not part of the instruction, and therefore should not be considered in grading the student's written work. In some cases, however (e.g., composition and language-arts classes), they are appropriate to consider in grading since attention is given to them as part of the instruction. In other cases, these elements may be required, but not used for grading.

8. *God does not include how hard a person tries (effort) in the salvation decision* (Isaiah 64:6; Romans 3:10). Jesus said that people will not be saved based on their having done wonderful works in His name (Matthew 7:21-23).

Teachers should encourage and reward effort, but not by including effort in grades. Grades should be based on the degree to which the standard has been met by students based on the level of instruction provided to help them meet the outcome.

9. *God does not allow "extra credit" to compensate for failure to meet the criteria.* When the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he could do to be saved (requesting something to do for extra credit), Jesus just rephrased a previously stated required criterion (Matthew 19:16-22).

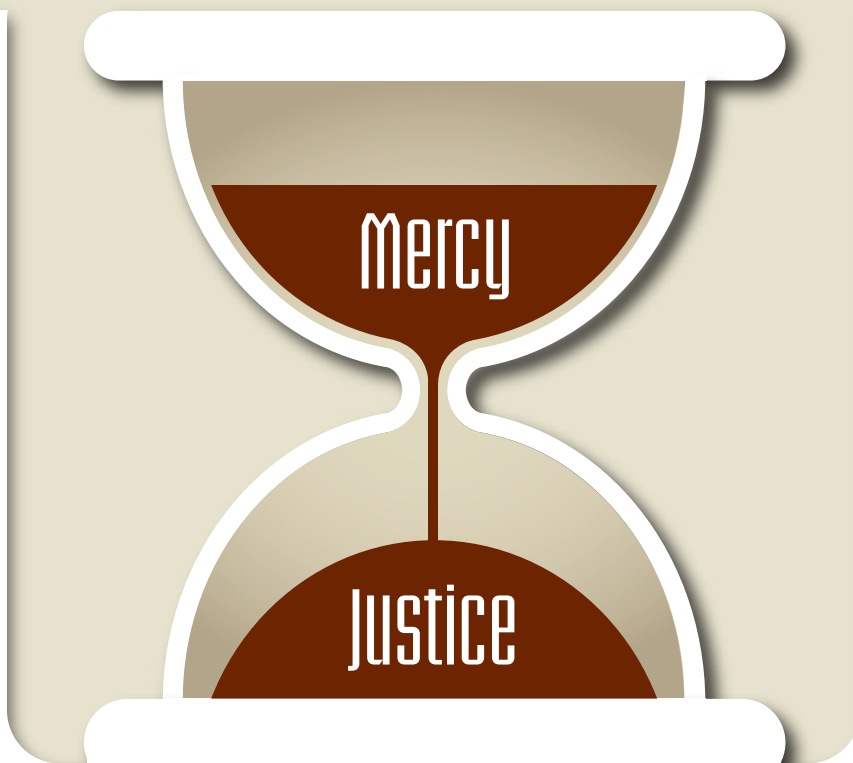
By definition, extra credit requires doing something that is not one of the regular stated assignments of the course. There is room in the lesson plan or syllabus for assignments that provide opportunities for in-depth study or additional practice to build skills. Good teachers will build mercy into the class plan so there is no need to adjust it for selected students at the end of the course. To call these assignments "extra credit" is misleading and gives students a false sense of mercy. These assignments should help students reach the standard rather than take the place of reaching it. Grades, then, should only be based on achieving the regular stated outcomes, not on additional things that can compensate for not having met the standard requirements.

10. *God does not make a single salvation decision for all persons in a human being's group—family, household, or friends* (Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 14:12; Matthew 10:34-37).

While teachers may use various types of group work (e.g., collaborative learning, cooperative learning, problem- or project-based learning, etc.) to enhance the learning of each student, whenever possible the evaluation used for grading should be conducted for each student separately.

#### God Uses Continuous Data Collection

1. *God does not use intermediate (formative) assessment data for final salvation decisions.* He uses intermediate assessments in our daily life, including assessing and responding to how we deal with trials and temptations, to guide us; but failure to meet the standard (not having faith) at these times is not counted against a person who at a later date meets the standard (has faith). As a result, God assesses both during and at the conclusion of each person's life (1 John 1:9; Philippians 1:6).



It is best for teachers to use many or most quizzes and daily assignments as formative learning activities and not as measures of final, summative evaluations of learning for grading. Long-term projects and term papers should have formative check-points along the way to ensure that the learner is moving in the right direction and to correct his or her course before the project or paper is completed.

2. *God does not use surprise measurements for final decision making* (John 5:24; Ephesians 2:8, 9; Acts 4:12). He bases salvation decisions on an assessment of each person's relationship with Christ at the end of his or her life, not at some unannounced point prior to that time.

Teachers should not use surprise quizzes for grading purposes. If unannounced quizzes are given, they should be used for learning purposes (formative assessment). Assessment activities used for grading purposes should not surprise students in terms of either the content or the timing of the assessment.

3. *God establishes a reasonable deadline for meeting the criteria*

(Luke 23:39-43; 2 Peter 3:9). He gives us our whole life to meet the criteria for salvation.

Teachers should set reasonable time deadlines for meeting class outcomes that can be met by most, if not all, students. Deadlines should be set up in a way that allows all students to have sufficient time to complete the activity or assignment. All deadlines should be clearly announced and adhered to (justice) but documented extenuating circumstances might create a need for the deadlines to be extended (mercy).

4. *God does not allow for evidence to be submitted after the deadline.* After the close of probation for each individual, no new data will be accepted. (e.g., Matthew 25, parable of the 10 virgins). God's mercy has limitations.

Teachers should not hesitate to announce to students that deadlines will be adhered to (unless there are extenuating circumstances).

5. *God does not take off points (lower the person's grade) for "late submissions."* Satisfactory evidence

of meeting the standard at the last moment (e.g., the thief on the cross in Luke 23:39-43) is considered sufficient for obtaining eternal life. But God does set deadlines beyond which it is not possible for His mercy to be extended (the close of probation).

It may be appropriate for teachers to not accept work after a stated deadline (with appropriate application of mercy in extenuating circumstances), but seldom advisable to lower the student's grade (take off points) for late work. If a student has achieved 100 percent mastery of the subject, but after the deadlines set by the teacher, a grade of "B," "C," or "D" as the result of points deducted because of when the assignment was turned in, this would not be appropriate—only a pass/fail grade should be given in this situation, or an "A" (the requirements were met) or an "F" (the evidence for learning was submitted too late).

### **God Uses an Appropriate Blend of Justice and Mercy**

It is common for students to feel that the grade they received was not "just" but based on something other than their actual level of learning. To be "just," the grades students receive should reflect only the extent to which they have met the stated outcomes of the course. It is also common for students to feel that their teacher gave too much mercy (usually to other students) and/or too little mercy (to themselves). While most teachers want to exhibit mercy, many of them lack clarity over where and when mercy should be applied. Teachers need to seek to apply an appropriate blend of justice and mercy.

1. *The bases for God's decisions combine justice and mercy* (Psalm 145:8, 9; Romans 8:1-4). A clear standard is set and adhered to (justice), but mercy allows sinful persons to meet the standard (with Christ's righteousness), and God is patient

when human beings do not initially meet the standard, actively working through His Spirit to bring them to salvation.

2. *God uses mercy at appropriate times* (Luke 23:34; 2 Peter 3:10) *and in appropriate ways*. There are two main ways God uses mercy prior to the final salvation-related decision: (a) the continual pleading of the Holy Spirit to draw us to Him (John 6:44), and (b) by patiently welcom-

Common ways in which justice is not achieved in assessment would be when teachers use varying criteria for different students or offer alternative ways to demonstrate achievement only to selected students.

ing us when we come to Him, extending to us His long-suffering nature, not wanting any to perish (2 Peter 3:9).

Mercy should be given during the learning process or in deciding on the type of assessment, not after the final evaluation of the learning (e.g., grading).

There are three main times when teachers can use mercy appropriately in grading. First, before and/or

during instruction, teachers can modify the lesson plan or specific assignments to meet the needs of each student. Second, during assessment, teachers can modify the procedures used in order to meet the needs of each student (while still maintaining justice by using the same criterion as for the grade). For example, students with English-language deficiencies might be allowed additional time to take an examination, or all students might be allowed to redo an assignment or retake an alternate form of a test. Third, in awarding grades, the standard used for grading could be adjusted to make allowances for unforeseen circumstances. For example, a teacher might have initially set the standard for an “A” grade to be 90 percent. But if severe weather has caused school to be closed for many days that could not be made up, the standard could legitimately be lowered (mercy), and applied to all students (justice).

3. *God does not distribute mercy selectively—it is freely given to all* (Genesis 18; Jonah 4:2; Romans 3:22-24).

Students frequently ask teachers for mercy at grading time. If teachers believe that mercy is justified, the condition of the mercy bestowed should be extended to all students. Modification of a standard due to extenuating circumstances should not be extended only to selected students.

Common ways in which justice is not achieved in assessment would be when teachers use varying criteria for different students or offer alternative ways to demonstrate achievement only to selected students. Common ways to show mercy in assessment would be to allow alternative ways to demonstrate achievement or to allow students multiple attempts to demonstrate mastery. But the alternative ways available and the opportunities for multiple attempts should be documented, announced, and available to all stu-

dents<sup>6</sup> to ensure justice.

4. *God does not respond to pleadings for mercy after the close of probation* (Revelation 20:11-15; Revelation 22:11).

A common way in which mercy is misused is when a teacher changes the grade of a student based on evidence not derived from his or her achievement, such as the student’s pleading for a higher grade because he or she has to complete the class as a prerequisite or needs a higher GPA to graduate or gain admission to another school, because of being ill or injured at the time an exam was given, or to avoid an unpleasant confrontation with his or her parents. Mercy can be shown in these circumstances in other appropriate ways (e.g., allowing students to take a rescheduled exam) rather than by simply changing the grade, which does not ensure mastery of the content. The goal must be to ensure that at the end of the course the student has acquired the information and mastered the skills mandated in the syllabus. In areas such as healthcare, failure to ensure mastery could be a matter of life and death as students begin working with patients.

5. *God combines both mercy and justice when dealing with individual circumstances* (Genesis 18; Jonah 4:2). Because of sin, humanity was destined for eternal death (justice). In this sinful state, reaching God’s standard is impossible; however, He provided a substitute (Romans 8:1-4) so that the standard could be met (mercy), and because of this, all have the promise of eternal life.

Not allowing assessments to be redone might be justice but would not show mercy. Allowing assessments to be redone based on the whim of the teacher, or only for selected students, would be merciful, but not just. Allowing assessments to be redone as a matter of normal



procedures for all students combines justice and mercy.

### Conclusion

Assessment and grading procedures are complex, requiring many decisions related to the content, timing, administering, and interpretation of the information gathered and used. In all of these decisions, an appropriate blend of justice and mercy should be applied.

### Justice

Grades should be based solely on assessment of relevant data, assigned and assessed using appropriate procedures. They should also be based on data that are collected with a minimum of bias, using multiple measurements whenever possible, with achievement measured at the conclusion of instruction. Appropriate criteria for grades should be clearly specified.

### Mercy

Mercy should be shown during assessment by allowing multiple attempts or alternative assessments to demonstrate mastery, using assessment conducted during learning to assist learning rather than for grading decisions, and making adjustments for individual differences in the assessment process.

### Blend of Justice and Mercy

As mercy is extended, care needs to be given that justice is not compromised. And likewise, as justice is adhered to, care needs to be given that mercy is not compromised. As each assessment and grading decision is made, the appropriate blend of justice and mercy needs to be considered.

### Application

In assessment and grading, a wide variety of options are available. The appropriateness of each assessment and grading option varies by class, by teacher, and by student. It will be helpful if teachers in each

school or school system, both individually and collectively, evaluate the examples and principles mentioned above, and determine the appropriateness of each assessment and grading option for their local situation—their classes and their students. Discussing the appropriateness of these options with colleagues, will help teachers develop skill in applying the characteristics of good assessment and better understand how assessment can be used to model the principles of God's kingdom in their individual situation. ✍

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*This article has been peer reviewed.*

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Grading has long been a source of anxiety and fear. Several sources support this; see, for example, Jeffrey Schinske and Kimberly Tanner, "Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently)," *CBE Life Science Education* 13:2 (Summer 2014): 159-166: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4041495/>; Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, "Grades and Grading" (2019): <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/teaching/teaching-how/chapter-5-grading-and-evaluation/grades-and-grading>; Susan M. Brookhart, "Teachers' Grading Practices: Meaning and Values," *Journal of Educational Measurement* 30:2 (Summer 1993): 123-142.
2. This article was written with the classroom teacher in mind, many of whom have taken courses in classroom testing and evaluation and possess an understanding of best practices in using as-

essment effectively. For those without this background knowledge, several resources provide examples of how to effectively plan and structure formative and summative assessments; see, for example, the work of Robert J. Marzano, *Classroom Assessment and Grading That Work* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2009); James W. Popham, *Classroom Assessment: What Teachers Need to Know* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 2011); James McMillan, *Classroom Assessment: Principles and Practice for Effective Standards-Based Instruction* (Boston, Mass.: Pearson, 2013); and Kathryn Parker Boudett et al., *Data Wise: A Step-by-Step Guide to Using Assessment Results to Improve Teaching and Learning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Press, 2013). Educators should take advantage of any opportunity to improve their competency in this area, since doing so can strengthen their practice and the students' experiences.

3. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1911), 660, 661; see also Daniel 7:22; 1 Corinthians 6:2, 3; Revelation 20:4, 6.

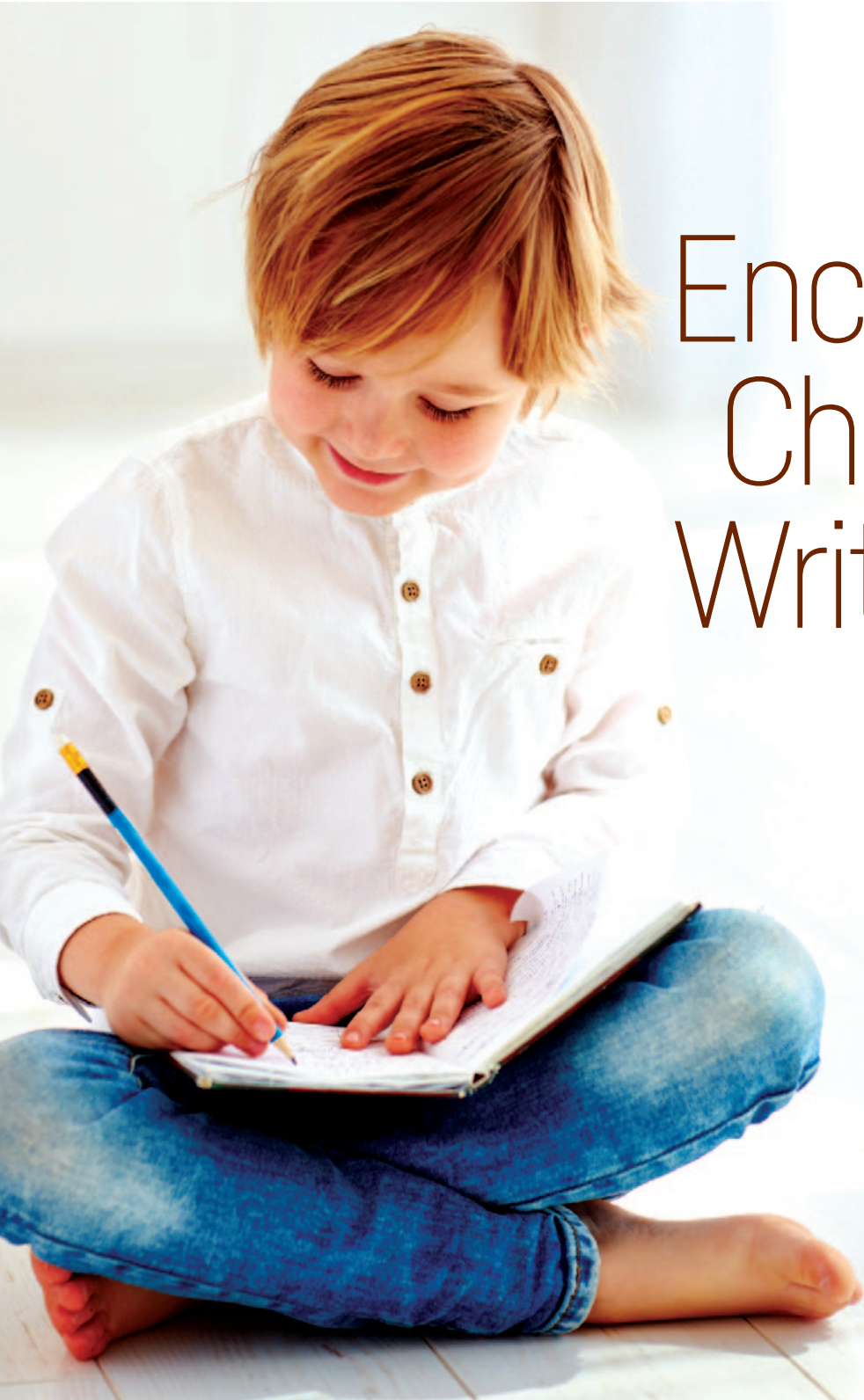
4. Several Scripture texts tell of God's recording-keeping regarding the lives of all people (Revelation 20:12); the names of all believers and those who fear God (Revelation 20:15; Malachi 3:16); the number of hairs on each person's head (Matthew 10:30; Luke 12:7); the tears cried (Psalm 56:8); features of every person (Psalm 139:16); every word uttered (Matthew 12:16); and service (Matthew 6:10; Hebrews 6:10).

5. God asks for a contrite, earnest spirit. Also, in *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1892), page 93, Ellen White counseled that "Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend."

6. Procedures for dealing with individual exceptions, students in need of special accommodations for learning, and emergencies as they relate to assessments should be clearly documented and explained to students (e.g., define how mercy will be applied), and these procedures should be applied equally for all students and carefully documented (to ensure justice). It is important to note that accommodations or modifications to the curriculum that allow learners with learning disabilities to meet the standard should not alter curricular content, change what is to be assessed, or give an added advantage. These modifications allow students to meet the standard by learning how to work with their challenges. For more information, see National Center for Learning Disabilities, "Accommodations for Students With LD" (2019): <http://www.ldonline.org/article/8022/>.



Ramona L. Hyman



# Encouraging Children to Write Poetry

**T**he value of including creative writing in a language-arts curriculum is underscored by the United States National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In their manual created for parents entitled *Imagine!: Introducing Your Child to the Arts*, the author says:

“A child who becomes a confident and creative writer will reap the benefits in countless ways. In school, children who write well find that they excel in almost every subject. . . . Becoming confident writers makes it possible for children to grow into active, critical participants in our culture and society.”<sup>1</sup>

As I reflect upon the importance of exposing students to creative writing, I am compelled to share a story about a young writer I met while teaching a creative-writing workshop on poetry

at an elementary school. This writer seared into my imagination the importance of children having a classroom experience in creative writing.

**The story:** I'll call the young writer Penelope Poetry. Penelope Poetry evokes meaningful educational memories for me. The class had written a group haiku. I asked for a volunteer to read the poem. Penelope volunteered. When she finished reading the poem, she said, "I feel like my brain is getting bigger." Indeed, a child's brain can expand by adding neurons and internal connections as a result of learning how to write poetry, and for this reason it is imperative that creative writing, in general, and poetry more specifically, be included in the language-arts curriculum.<sup>2</sup>

Writing creatively and writing poetry, specifically, do help students grow into confident human beings because the discipline of writing inspires critical thinking; it is a "challenging cognitive task. A poet must first have a basic understanding of a concept or emotion and then transform that understanding into meaningful creative expression by exploring and distilling complex ideas into the brief format of a poem."<sup>3</sup> This understanding may be literal or visceral. Poems do not evolve in just one way. Ronald L. Cramer says that "[p]oetry is a bridge between the inner and outer worlds of childhood. Writing poetry enables children to transmit their internal experiences to the outer world—to symbolize their experiences in words."<sup>4</sup> And because children have myriad mental, physical, and spiritual experiences as they grow, their poems will evolve in unique ways. Let me explain.

### A Practical Example of the Poetry Experience

Once I was teaching a poetry workshop in a 6th-grade middle school classroom with a multiethnic/multigrade population. I asked the students to write a haiku. During our sharing circle, one young man recited his 17-syllable poem using the

rhythm of a rap poem. One of his cultural cues was rap music, which he brought into his poetic experience. That's what often happens when one is writing poetry: The whole being of the person is translated into words.

Now about Penelope Poetry: While working as an artist in residence, I was assigned to facilitate a week-long poetry workshop for children between the ages of 7 and 11. I refer to Penelope Poetry as my friend, incidentally, because a good way to engage students in an authentic and positive learning relationship is to reach out to them in affirming ways that build friendships. I shared a bond with Penelope and her peers; our mutual journey toward learning to use poetry to express thoughts and ideas served as the foundation of our friendship. When teachers serve as friendly facilitators within the learning environment, this creates a non-threatening atmosphere. The teacher becomes the guide who encourages and inspires students to think freely and spontaneously, not just the commander of the ship.

The objective of the residency was for me to guide students through the journal writing process and to introduce them to the art of writing poetry. I chose to teach them a traditional poetic form, the haiku. It is important to expose young writers to traditional poetic forms such as the haiku, tanka, and sonnet in a creative writing class/workshop because this introduces them to other cultures. The tanka and haiku, for example, are poetry forms introduced to the literary canon by the Japanese. Learning to create a haiku teaches one "to do something small in a meaningful way."<sup>5</sup>

In addition, subliminally, an awareness of poetic forms teaches students how to develop strategies for writing all kinds of poetry, even poetry traditionally referred to as free verse. When using traditional poetic forms, the student must stay within the syllabic or line requirements. For

example, a student writing traditional haiku must keep within the poem's 5/7/5 syllabic pattern. This attention to syllabic and line structure fosters a respect and honor for words, as the student must be attentive to the connotative and denotative meanings of the word as it relates to the overall theme of the poem. They also much keep in mind the word's syllabic count.

Teaching poetic forms, moreover, can also increase a student's awareness of how to follow instructions

A child's brain can grow bigger when exposed to and involved with the arts. Having young writers participate in writing games and exercises is one way of developing creative consciousness and poetic sensibility.

and work within the limits of an assignment. This may be helpful with longer writing assignments like essays and research papers. Further, teaching poetic forms can also, to use Penelope Poetry's own words, help students experience the feeling of their brains "getting bigger."

*The brain growing bigger.* Metaphorically speaking, Penelope Poetry is right; a child's brain can grow bigger when exposed to and involved with the arts.<sup>6</sup> Having young writers participate in writing games and exercises is one way of developing creative consciousness and poetic sensibility.

Games and exercises help young writers acquire focus and discipline. The craft of writing is certainly a type of discipline. Some may argue that talent can't be taught; however, it is possible to create an intellectual and visceral understanding of the creative process, and to provide inspiration.

### Poetry Writing Games

One fun and instructive game is the **Poetry Ball**. Students are asked to sit in a circle. The ball is a metaphor for a word, and a piece of paper is a metaphor for the person. The goal of the game is to keep the "word" ball or balls on the page (with young children [Grades K-4], I use four words. With older students [Grades 5-12] an unlimited number of words can be used). After placing the students in the circle, I tell each one to throw the ball (word) to another person (a metaphor for a piece of paper). That person becomes the paper; the ball is the word. Therefore, each child must throw a ball (word) to one person (piece of paper). This forces the writer to focus. The student must focus on the person from whom he or she is receiving the ball (word) and to whom he or she subsequently throws the ball (word) (another person). The objective, thus, is to keep the balls (words) off the floor and in the laps of the students (on the page).

However, what happens if a student writer drops or doesn't catch the ball (the word)? Traditionally, he or she would be banished from the game, but eliminating players is not the goal in this game. If the ball (word) is dropped, the challenge for the writers is to work together so all balls (words) can stay on the page (off the floor).

The objectives in the Poetry Ball game are to teach poetry writers the importance of focus in writing, and to understand that writing is work. In order to keep the ball (the word) on the page, i.e., in order to develop poems, essays, and plays, the writer

must work until every word on the page contributes to the message he or she seeks to convey.

Another game teachers can use to help early elementary writers develop the spontaneity a writer needs is **Story in the Round**. The students are asked to sit in a circle, either on the floor or in chairs around a table (in this case, the items used in the game are placed on the table). The teacher must be an enthusiastic participant, not just the "one in charge"; this means that he or she must sit in the circle also. The key is for each writer to feel comfortable. The teacher places sticks of various colors in the center of the circle (items relating to other themes can also be used: i.e., kitchen utensils, hats, shoes, or a mixture of items).

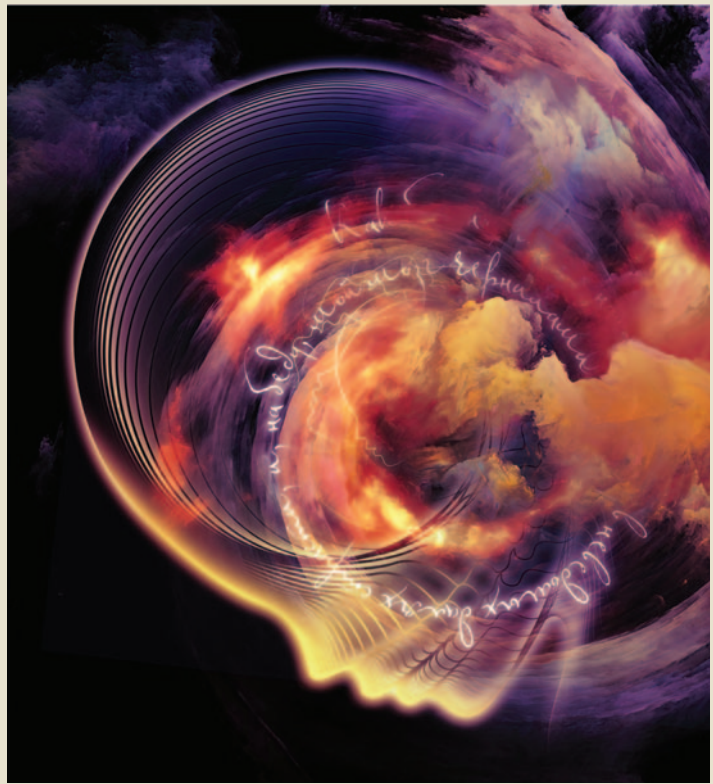
Before the exercise, the teacher selects a lead writer—usually himself or herself, or an aide. However, I have found that sometimes, depending on the maturity and self-confidence of the students in the class, an older student can fill this role.

To start the game, the lead writer picks up a stick, and creates one sen-

tence that incorporates one of the stick's features—its color or shape, the way it feels, et cetera. Moving clockwise from the lead writer, each student must continue the plot line collaboratively created by the preceding writers, using the remaining sticks (or objects in the circle). The Story in the Round continues until someone takes more than 10 seconds to make a contribution (the teacher must gauge when the story should end). The objective is to encourage students to think spontaneously. Teaching students to write spontaneously can be stimulated by bringing a variety of items into the class that inspire writing activity.

### Writing Activity

One useful type of writing activity is **The Writer's Sensory Experience**. What would a mathematical equation describing the writing of poetry look like? Perhaps something like this: **Poetry = feeling things and seeing pictures**. A reader might not be able to linguistically articulate the meaning of a poem like this:



here I stand writing  
letters nudging me softly  
trickling into thought.<sup>7</sup>

However, the meaning of a poem is also derived from the feelings a reader experiences as a result of reading, hearing, or even writing a poem.

Below are the instructions for the sensory experience exercise:

- Give each writer a small cotton ball.
- Instruct the participants to “Roll the ball around in your hands for two to three minutes.”
- When the time is up, tell them to stop and put the balls down.
- Ask your writers to write four to five words that come to mind as a result of the exercise (the words don’t necessarily have to be about the cotton ball).

I have found that my students’ experiences with the cotton ball trigger other thoughts. Several items can be used to evoke a greater variety of sensory responses: perfume for smell (find one that is inexpensive; but make sure first that there are no student allergies), pictures from magazines or family photos for sight, lemon or orange for taste, etc. The goal is to help students understand that ideas for poems and essays come from all sorts of things and places.

Further, I have my students write about four words for each item brought in, and I then use these words to help them develop poems, especially shorter poems like the haiku. For younger children, try asking them to write a group haiku, or provide a starter line with five syllables like: “I like poetry,” then ask them to develop two more lines: seven syllables in the second line and five syllables in the last line. This kind of activity can also take place at an art museum. Many museums are equipped with rooms especially designed for young people.

### Cross-disciplinary Writing

One of the easiest ways to include

creative writing in the language-arts curriculum is to incorporate another subject area in the assignment. For example, students could write poems using the subject matter of a historic moment. This type of cross-disciplinary poetry writing offers a way of helping them understand the relationship between poetry and lived experiences.

Cross-disciplinary creative writing is also a way of satisfying curriculum goals. This works especially well for students in Grades 4 and above. Below is a sample poem written on the American Civil Rights Movement. The subject of the poem is the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 that took place in Montgomery, Alabama:

### A Hymn for Montgomery 55

Holy, holy: a hymn of praise  
For prophets framing freedom  
In Montgomery 55:  
Strange fruits marching—  
some  
Walking, some crawling—  
Americans: black and white;  
hand in hand  
Saintly sighing a freedom  
song of praise  
Holy, holy, holy—the march  
raises  
Into victory: freedom swells;  
The flag: separate and  
Unequal shreds into the face  
of anxious  
Soldiers—black and white  
jumping the broom  
Into a new day—the Civil  
Rights Movement begins.<sup>8</sup>

### Creating a Workshop Environment

When teaching creative writing, it is important for teachers to develop a workshop environment. In order to accomplish this, classrooms need to contain creative writing tools. In small

classrooms, these tools can be placed in a **Creative Writing Box**. The following items could be included in the box:

- Books on the subject of creative writing (see **Sidebar 1**);
- Teacher’s journal;
- Students’ journals (A traditional black-and-white notebook is a good beginning; it is also inexpensive);
- Pens or pencils;
- Scratch paper of various colors;
- Dictionary;
- Thesaurus;
- Sensory items: cotton, lotion, perfume, artificial flowers, small balls.

Children’s poet Kristine George suggests many exciting ways of celebrating poetry and keeping it as an

### Sidebar 1. Creative Writing Resources

#### Books

- Clark, Kevin. *The Mind’s Eye. A Guide to Writing Poetry* (Boston: Pearson Longman, 2008).
- Babette Deutsch, *Poetry Handbook: A Dictionary of Terms* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).
- Moore, Ellen Jo. *Writing Poetry With Children* (Monterrey, Calif.: Evan-Moor Educational Publishers, 1999).
- Neubauer, Bonnie. *The Write Brain Workbook* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer’s Digest Books, 2006).
- Ross, Bruce. *How to Haiku* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2002).

#### Websites

- Kristine O’Connell George’s Website provides helpful resources on teaching and writing poetry: <http://www.kristinegeorge.com>.
- *Poets and Writers* provides resources for writers: <http://www.pw.org/>. *Poetry.Org* offers several poetry resources for various age levels.
- *EDSITEment!* Literature and Language Arts Lessons: <https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans?keywords=literature+and+language+arts>.
- *EDSITEment!* Poetry Lesson Plans: <https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans?keywords=poetry>.

important part of the curriculum. For example, she recommends that teachers “keep a basket of poems handy in [the] classroom.”<sup>9</sup>

It is important, moreover, to create an environment in the classroom that fosters creative writing. Generally, a writing community, says Hal Blythe, “creates groups of writers with similar interests and uses group energy and skills to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.”<sup>10</sup> The writing community concept works well with students in the upper elementary grades. Ideally, each writing community will include four students. Students may form their own writing groups based on interest or be assigned to a writing group by the teacher. During the creative writing period, members of writing communities can help one another revise poems and develop ideas for poetry activities. Ideally, the writing community will also help participants feel comfortable talking about their writing and underscore the idea that writing is a process, not a finished product.

### Final Thoughts

In addition to helping children grow intellectually and emotionally, creative writing is fun. Children enjoy hearing themselves read from their own work; therefore, after a lesson on creative writing, have a poetry reading, create a classroom journal to share students’ poems, or bind poems together in a class book that includes all of the students’ poems. Although most students are excited about the possibility of publishing and sharing their poems with a wider audience, teachers should be prepared with alternate publication options for those who may prefer not to have their work shared in public. If a school would like to publish a book of poetry,

Bookemon is a user-friendly site that can be used to develop and published a collection of poetry (<https://www.bookemon.com/>). Whatever approach is used, the goal is to encourage young people to write. They need the opportunity to hear the sound of their own voices and visually experience their thoughts on a printed page.

Facilitating creative writing workshops in language-arts classrooms is not an extravagance; it is a necessity. Penelope Poetry reminded me that creative writing for young people is an imperative; students have a right to experience their brains “getting bigger” by creating literary gems. ✍

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*This article has been peer reviewed.*

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### Recommended citation:

**Ramona L. Hyman**, “Encouraging Children to Write Poetry,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 81:4 (October-December 2019): 34-38.

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Although written for parents, this manual contains approaches that could easily be integrated into the classroom setting. For more information, see National Endowment for the Arts, *Imagine: Introducing Your Child to the Arts* (2004):

<https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Imagine.pdf>.

2. Numerous studies show that poetry, like music, stimulates and “grows” the brain by activating and forming new synapses in response to rhythm and sound. See Siyuan Liu et al., “Brain Activity and Connectivity During Poetry Composition: Toward a Multidimensional Model of the Creative Process,” *Human Brain Mapping* 36:9 (September 2015): 3351-3372. doi:0.1002/hbm.22849; and Patrick J. Kiger, “The Human Brain Is Hardwired for Poetry,” *How Stuff Works* (April 2017): <https://science.howstuffworks.com/life/inside-the-mind/human-brain/how-poetry-affects-human-brain.htm>.

3. Patricia Conner-Green et al., “Poetry: It’s Not Just for English Class Anymore,” *Teaching of Psychology* 32:4 (October 2005): 215-221.

4. Ronald Cramer, *The Nature and Nurture of Children’s Writing* (New York: Longman, 2001).

5. Bruce Ross, *How to Haiku: A Writer’s Guide to Haiku and Related Forms* (North Clarendon, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2002).

6. David A. Sousa, “How the Arts Develop the Young Brain,” *The School Administrator* 63:11 (December 2006): 26-31: <https://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=7378>.

7. © Ramona L. Hyman. Published with permission.

8. Ramona L. Hyman, “A Hymn for Montgomery 55,” *In the Sanctuary of the South: Selected Poems by Ramona Hyman* (Belleville, Ontario: Essence Publishing, 2005), 25. Reprinted with permission.

9. Kristine O’Connell George: <http://www.kristinegeorge.com>.

10. Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet, “The Writing Community: A New Model for the Creative Writing Classroom,” *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 8:2 (Spring 2008): 305-325.

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with their single biggest source of stress being school.<sup>6</sup>

These challenges do not exist only within the United States. Countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and India report high levels of school-related stress faced by students, most of which comes from the pressures of preparing for high-stakes national testing, the results of which determine the trajectory of students' lives.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Annalee's source of stress, these students face long hours of in- and out-of-class study and tutoring sessions (some upwards of 12 hours a day), and their families invest time and resources into making sure they do well. And even with that, most universities in these countries can only accept two to three percent of those who do well. For those who do not make the cut, there is disappointment, shame, and, in some extreme cases, death by suicide.<sup>8</sup>

So, what do we do about school-related stress? How do we ensure that students in our care are seen, heard, and understood? Armstrong presents as an answer "the mindful solution to stress."<sup>9</sup> He notes that schools in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia are investing in training educators in best-practice approaches to integrating mindfulness throughout the curriculum. Findings show that these approaches have the potential to relieve stress in students, boost self-regulation and social and emotional skills, working memory, and executive functioning such as learning to focus, plan, organize—processes necessary to successfully complete daily tasks.<sup>10</sup>

Since 1970, more than 3,000 research articles and studies have been conducted on the benefits of using mindfulness to treat stress, anxiety, depression, and many other issues.<sup>11</sup> There are several types of mindfulness practices (mindful breathing, walking, eating, etc.) and central to each one is the ability to *focus*. Education researchers are now recommending time in the day, preferably at the beginning of each class period, for deep, focused breathing and reflection. Willard and Saltzman illustrate how to teach mindfulness to students with this example: For an early-morning exercise, teachers have students spend five minutes in focused, deep breathing while contemplating the thoughts and concerns they have experienced since awakening or up to the specific point in the school day; followed by 20 minutes in recall and reflective writing; after which students engage in 20 minutes of active discussion.<sup>12</sup> What is most fascinating is a statement by Saltzman: "[b]ut what teachers find is, if they start class with five minutes of mindfulness—movement, breathing, journaling—most teachers will report ending up with more teachable time."<sup>13</sup>

Sound familiar? Well, it should. While mindfulness may be the popular trend in education right now, this is what many Adventist educators have done in their schools and classrooms for years. School-wide morning worships where students sing, share, and pray; classroom devotions and prayer time in small groups led by a committed educator; or

opportunities to engage in reflective writing and participate in small groups or prayer bands are all activities found in most Adventist schools. And we should do this more often and more consistently. We must teach our students to cling to reassuring promises such as "do not be anxious about anything," and to claim the "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:6, 7, ESV).<sup>14</sup> We can also share words from inspiration, which remind us that "Prayer is the breath of the soul. It is the secret of spiritual power. . . . Prayer brings the heart into immediate contact with the Wellspring of life."<sup>15</sup> And beyond that, we must take active steps to ensure that students know we are interested in how they navigate the challenges and pressures from peers, home, and school. Do we carve out significant movements of time in our day to listen to them? Pray with them? Or do we plow ahead with our plans—dragging them along, kicking and screaming, all for the greater good of preparing them for this world?

Annalee's outburst led me to engage in moments of deep reflection. With humility I changed my classroom environment, providing more time for students to decompress, work independently, and experience more balanced instruction. Cain recommends strategies such as using Think-Pair-Share, using wait time effectively before calling on students, involving the student and his or her parents in discussing how best to address the student's anxiety, or using groups effectively, as helpful ways of integrating extra support into the classroom environment that benefit all students.<sup>16</sup>

Several articles in this issue address the importance of creating safe spaces for students to grow into the unique, one-of-a-kind individuals God created them to be as we select curricular content, approaches to instruction, grading and evaluation practices, and so many of the other teacher-driven decisions that are made each day. Janie Daniel Hubbard writes about making curricular decisions that are culturally responsive, the final article in this series (page 9; see also *Culturally Responsive Teaching in Adventist Schools* for additional articles), and Ramona L. Hyman shares several strategies for encouraging young writers to express themselves through poetry (page 34). In "Feedback as a Conversation: The Power of Bidirectional Feedback," Julie Cook addresses effective ways to not only give feedback to students, but also receive feedback from students, to ensure that understanding takes place (page 4). And Jerome Thayer explores how to use the principles of justice and mercy in assessment and grading practices as a way of modeling how God interacts with everyone (page 27). John Wesley Taylor V continues the discussion on creating a biblical foundation for research in "Research and the Search for Truth" (page 14), and in the final article in our *Boards* series, Robert Crux writes about "When a School Board Member Goes Rogue" (page 21; see also *School Boards* for additional articles).

We hope the articles in this issue provide food for thought, and we look forward to your feedback. Consider submitting

a letter to the editor here or by e-mailing [megarrellf@gc.adventist.org](mailto:megarrellf@gc.adventist.org). Or, share your own reflections by submitting an article to our *Best Practices at Work* feature section, a space created specifically for classroom teachers to share what works. Visit <https://jae.adventist.org/en/for-authors> for more on how to submit. Or for shorter, more reflective themes, consider writing for our Adventist Educators Blog (<https://educators.adventist.org/submission-guidelines/>). We look forward to hearing from you!

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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