Teaching Essence:

A Case for Staff Development and Instructional Coaching

in the

Adventist School System

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What Will Bring Change in Adventist Education?

Let me begin with a caveat. At first brush, it would appear that I am being critical of teachers in the Adventist school system. The exact opposite is true. Rather, this paper is a plea to analyze what is killing Adventist education and to give teachers in the system the help they need to be successful in these transformational times.

In January 1988 the Joint Boards of Education, K-12 and Higher Education, met in Loma Linda, California, to review the results of the Seltzer Daley Study[1]. In a vision-to-action planning session, these boards conceived and ultimately launched *Project Affirmation*, a three-year program to translate church members' visions into educational change. Since the vision was to give Adventists a reason to stay committed to our school systems, marketing Adventist education was a large focus of the project[2].

I find it interesting that the focus of the former *Project Affirmation* is much the same as that advertised for the upcoming *Crossroads of Peril and Promise,* now some twenty-two years later.

The generational tribal wisdom of the Dakota Indians says this: "When you discover that you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount." A respected colleague has a saying, “God doesn’t bless mess.” And I would add, “You cannot market mess.” Is it time to dismount and analyze what is actually killing Adventist education?

Isn’t the purpose of Adventist education to educate children and youth? As such, then the most important component is the classroom teacher. Teachers are every school’s most vital resource. Instead of trying to identify and eliminate weaknesses of the educational system, if we maximize the potential of each teacher the entire system will see improvements in student achievement.

I recently visited an academy campus. One of the teachers on that campus had a class in which forty percent of the students were making Fs. Furthermore, the failing teacher would often comment in staff meetings, “It’s not my place to teach them how to study. They should have learned that before they came here. They are just lazy.”

Sad, this mistaken mindset of one teacher.

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[1] Project Affirmation’s first major undertaking was a broad scale market research effort carried out by the Seltzer Daley Companies of Princeton, NJ to identify church members’ perceptions about Adventist education.

[2] The Journal of Adventist Education, Project Affirmation - Building Consensus, Planning for Success by Smith, Charles T; Volume 52, Issue 05, 1990; p. 14

Teacher Mindset

Dr. Robert Brooks, on the faculty of Harvard Medical School, says, "I believe that all children enter school wishing to learn and to succeed. I have never met a child first beginning school who has said, 'I hope I do not do well in school. I hope I have trouble learning. I hope my parents and my teachers are always on my back criticizing me about my school performance.' By acknowledging that all students have the desire to succeed, if they are then displaying academic and/or behavior problems, one must ask the question, 'What can teachers or schools do differently so that the student will succeed?'" [3]

What Does "Different" Look Like—and Will It Work?

Too often teachers develop a sense of confusion and helplessness about what to do with challenging students. Their response becomes increasingly punitive, as reflected in the classroom climate they help create (i.e., environments devoid of any sense of nurturing and individualizing). Often teachers fail to realize that their approach actually reinforces resentment and anger among the students.

Many teachers find that their work is increasingly pervaded by feelings of frustration, helplessness, and burnout. They rely on therapeutic and educational interventions that produce limited success. They are unable to develop alternative strategies to help youngsters with learning difficulties, resulting in angry or defiant behaviors. Staff meetings are dominated by discussions of not how to reach them, but how to restrain them.

In faculty workroom conversations, the teacher who says, "Johnny is just lazy. He could do the work if he wanted to," will get a different result with Johnny than the teacher who says, "Johnny learns in such an unusually different way. I have to find a way to help him succeed."

In what other profession could a professional fail forty percent of the time and still keep his or her job? Was that academy teacher hired to teach students or to fail students? If the student has not learned at this point how to study, and it is not the teacher's job to teach him/her, then whose job is it? And what about instructional methods? Educators point to the CognitiveGenesis Study[4] as evidence that the Adventist system works.

However, if my child were in the forty percent failure group at the academy I visited, and I took him out of the school because he was not receiving the help he needs, he would not show up in the CognitiveGenesis Study.

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[3] http://www.drrobertbrooks.com/writings/articles/0509.html

[4] *CognitiveGenesis* is the first division-wide (United States, Canada, and Bermuda) study to assess Adventist academics in elementary and secondary schools.

This raises two questions. First, does CognitiveGenesis accurately reflect instructional practices in the Adventist system, or has a category of students been weeded out of the system? Secondly, to which group are we marketing?

Marketing a program where teachers truly take responsibility for the success of their students is relatively easy. Marketing a program where the teachers say, "It's not my job to teach them how to study. It's not my job to motivate them. If they don't want to learn they don't need to come to my class" is doomed to fail.

Transformational Times

James Zull, Professor of Biology at Case-Western University in Ohio and author of *The Art of Changing the Brain – Enriching the Practice of Teaching by Exploring the Biology of Learning,* was asked in a radio interview if the sudden explosion of the idea of brain-compatible learning suggests that some teaching in fact may be brain antagonistic.

James Zull responded, "Yeah, I think so. We all know that schools for example don't seem to work very well, and I've just recently discovered in the history of education in this country that the actual set up for how we do classrooms and the scheduling and the bell ringing at the end of the period and the rows of chairs where the children sit and everything were actually designed so that children growing up would not think too much. That they would be very orderly and would be happy in assembly plants. It's a terrifying thing to read actually but there's a lot of revisiting the history of what people believe education is and what schools are, and those things certainly, not only are they not brain-compatible they're not human being compatible."[5]

If what Dr. Zull says is true, then it forces this question: Since schools were designed to serve the needs of the Industrial Age, and since the era of the Industrial Age has ended, does education need to be re-designed so that children become thinkers?

Teach Students to Be Thinkers

Daniel T. Willingham, in his book, *Why Don't Students Like School?* writes, "People are naturally curious, but we are not naturally good thinkers; unless the cognitive conditions are right, we will avoid thinking."[6] When Ellen White wrote, "[T]rain the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thought,[7]" was she implying that thinking is a trained skill?

It is my personal and professional belief that teachers need, want, and deserve help in these transformational times. Since many Adventist teachers grew up and were trained in teaching methods appropriate for another era, an era designed so that children growing up would not

[5] http://www.abc.net.au/rn/science/mind/s988614.htm

[6] *Why Don't Students Like School?* page 3

[7] Education page 17

think too much—Imagine that!—does it not stand to reason that our focus needs to improve teacher methodology, update curriculum, and position educators to teach with the brain in mind.

The answer for moving towards what the Adventist school system could and should become lies in one simple concept: self-reflection. It's not the *doing* that matters, said revered educator John Dewey: "It's the *thinking* about the doing."[8]

Whether an educator is a leading expert on best practices or knows very little about how to run a classroom is of no concern. What does matter is his/her personal level of self-reflection. Self-reflection is critical to a teacher's ability to move forward and become more effective in helping students learn and excel. Daudelin and Hall describe reflective learning as "the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder carefully and persistently its meaning…to reflect on the learning that is occurring."[9] In *Systems for Change in Literacy Education*, master educators Carol A. Lyons and Gay Su Pinnell point out, "You do not learn to be a good teacher of reading and writing in a few months, in a year, or even over a period of several years. Teaching skills develop over a lifetime."[10]

In *Building Teachers' Capacity for Success,* Pete Hall and Alisa Simeral have identified four developmental stages through which teachers generally progress as they become skilled in the art of self-reflection: Unaware, Conscious, Action, and Refinement. These phases accompany gains in expertise, experience, motivation, knowledge, and most definitively, self-reflective abilities.

Hall and Simeral describe teachers' tendencies and their classroom characteristics for each stage of self-reflection. The teacher in the Unaware Stage tends to:

- Demonstrate little or no awareness of instructional reality in the classroom
- Focuses on routine
- Exhibits the best of intentions
- Expresses confusion about own role in learning
- Collaborates with colleagues on a superficial level
- Defines problems inaccurately
- Focuses on the job itself—the *act* of teaching

Their classroom characteristics tend to be:

- Scripted lessons, with little or no teacher modeling
- Passive learning, with little or no student interaction
- Lessons built on direct instruction and assignments
- Little or no evidence of systematic, standards-based planning
- No differentiation of instruction

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[8]Archambault, 1974, emphasis added

[9] Daudelin and Hall, 1997, page13

[10] Lyons & Pinnell, 2001

- Little or no awareness of effective time management
- No link between instruction and assessment
- Little effort to make curriculum relevant to students

Teachers in the Unaware Stage have no awareness that their classroom could be any different than it currently is. They do not understand their role in student learning and indeed have little or no knowledge of research-based instructional practices. They truly want to be successful and even may be among the hardest working individuals on staff, yet consistently yield the smallest gains in student achievement. Many of our experienced teachers are still in this stage.

The teacher in the Conscious Stage tends to:

- Demonstrate a consistent "knowing-doing" gap
- Can ambiguously cite research to support current teaching methods
- Makes excuses for problems
- Becomes easily distracted from goals
- Collaborates inconsistently with colleagues
- Disregards others' ideas
- Focuses first on *self*

Their classroom characteristics tend to be:

- Instruction designed for teacher convenience
- Short-term planning evident yet inconsistent
- Occasional links between instruction and assessment
- Little student engagement in active, meaningful learning
- Little problem solving from students
- Occasional differentiation of instruction
- Noticeable swings in instructional approaches

Teachers in the Conscious Stage exhibit disconnect between their knowledge of best practices and daily classroom instruction. They are aware of what they *should* be doing and will often attempt a new strategy, but they lack the motivation and consistency to apply their knowledge in a meaningful way. They often choose to do what is best, easiest, or most convenient for them over what is best for their students.

The teacher in the Action Stage tends to:

- Accept responsibility for the success of all students and for own personal growth
- Evaluates issues and situations objectively
- Seeks to incorporate research-based concepts and strategies
- Reflects upon teaching only after the action
- Believes in only one "right" way of doing things
- Struggles to identify solutions to long-term problems
- Receives feedback well, then enters a critical loop
- Collaborates on a limited basis with colleagues
- Focuses on the science of teaching

Their classroom characteristics tend to be:

- Regular use of assessment to monitor student progress
- Consistent application of best-practices instructional strategies
- Lessons linked to standards
- Evidence of limited long-term planning
- Classroom appears functional, but gaps are lurking

Teachers who enter the Action Stage are motivated to change and begin to consistently integrate their knowledge with classroom instruction. Their mission is to unearth the "right" way to teach, believing that there is one instructional strategy that is better than the rest. They accept that the success of the student is their responsibility. They begin to recognize that there are individual needs, but lack the knowledge to address those needs in an efficient manner. They welcome constructive feedback and advice.

The teacher in the Refinement Stage tends to:

- Reflect before, during, and after taking action
- Recognizes that there are multiple "right" courses of action
- Maintains a vast repertoire of instructional strategies
- Engages in action research as common practice
- Modifies lessons and plans to meet students' needs
- Pursues opportunities to work and learn with colleagues
- Thinks beyond the classroom
- Focuses on the art of teaching

Their classroom characteristics tend to be:

- Assessment drives daily instruction
- Students largely responsible for their own learning
- Multiple instructional strategies in use

Teachers in the Refinement Stage are competent in the art of teaching. As they engage in reflective learning they will continue to shift their current way of doing things, recognizing that there is more than one "right" way of doing things. Their plans and strategies actively engage and support students by allowing for multiple ways of learning. Formal and informal assessments, both summative and formative, drive the instruction in their classrooms. They will modify and refine plans at a moment's notice to respond to student need, interest, and motivation.[11]

Clearly, if every classroom were directed by a teacher in the Refinement Stage on the Self-Reflection Continuum, students would walk away saying, "That was a positive learning environment!" But, far too often in Adventist classrooms you observe mostly the first two stages.

[11] Hall and Simeral pages 41-43

In *It's About Learning (and It's About Time)*, Stoll, Fink, and Earl[12] quote Stephanie Hirsch, executive director of the National Staff Development Council:

> For teachers, going to school must be as much about learning as it is about teaching. They must have time each day to learn, plan lessons, critique student work, and support improvement as members of learning teams.… Staff development cannot be something educators do only on specific days in the school calendar. It must be part of every educator's daily work schedule.

The role of staff development in the Adventist school system has largely been ignored. In these transformational times for education, that can no longer be acceptable. Michael Fullan in *The Challenge of Change: Start School Improvement Now! Second Edition* says:

> [T]here is much more to do to ensure there is a highly effective (more important than highly qualified) teacher in every classroom and a highly effective principal in every school. It is especially important to ensure that the schools facing the toughest challenges have access, as soon as possible, to the most talented teachers and leaders…There needs to be a constant focus on developing talent and building capacity.[13]

Staff development and instructional coaching must become part of the Adventist school system. It must be considered an investment in the most important element in any classroom—the teacher. When every teacher is a success and every student is a success, then we have something to market.

[12]Stoll, Fink, and Earl, 2003, page 98

[13] Michael Fullan, page 216

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