

# The Basics of Adventist Education

## What Are They? How Should They Be Taught?

By V. H. Fullerton

In *A Nation at Risk*, the National Commission on Excellence in Education strongly recommended that all American students be required to take the “New Basics”: four years of English, three years of mathematics, science, and social studies, and one-half year of computer science. Even though most educators would agree with the importance of including the “new basics” in the curriculum, they would protest that this is hardly a new idea, since for decades most good secondary education programs have included these subjects (with the possible exception of computer science) in the required curriculum for college-bound students. Perhaps the newness lies in the recommendation that these subjects be required of *all* secondary students, not just the college bound.

The national conscience has been aroused to unprecedented levels by this and many other reports trumpeting the decline in the quality of public education, a decline perceived by many as a threat to personal and national survival.

First, we need to define just what are the “basics” in education. Although this definition itself may be a cause for debate, in general educators would agree that the “basics” can be identified as a compulsory series of units covering

skills and subject matter that all students must master. If we accept that definition, then the basics of Seventh-day Adventist education would encompass the body of knowledge and skills in our distinctive philosophy and objectives that all students should master.

Because Adventists can draw from a large amount of knowledge about education acquired from inspiration and from more than a hundred years of implementation, curriculum planners need to establish some priorities in identifying the basics of SDA education.

For many decades Adventist education has emphasized a college-prep curriculum that has included communication skills,

mathematics, and science. But, more and more, curriculum that has been considered a precollege track at the secondary level is needed even for the student who does not plan to continue his or her education past high school. Today’s high school student faces a highly technical work world and needs to receive adequate preparation to cope with the challenges of the future.

However, in our drive to improve the core curriculum of our academies, we must not permit ourselves to get caught up in this new wave of enthusiasm and perhaps allow some significant SDA essentials to be forgotten in the process. The momentum of the

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The author is associate director of education for the North Pacific Union Conference of SDA, Portland, Oregon.

***Bible study is a basic skill in Adventist education.***

movement stressing ways to improve education should be utilized by SDA parents, lay persons, and educators to re-examine, define, and clarify what constitutes the *real* basics of Adventist education.

From my vantage point as an associate director of education, I would like to suggest the following subjects and skills as basic to SDA education.

### Religion

Religion, of course, constitutes one of the significant basics of Adventist education and must continue to be an essential part of each student's program. Preparing professionals and workers for the church with the goal of "finishing the work" has always been a high priority in Adventist education. Religion in Adventist schools implies more than just Bible classes or worships. If the school is to be truly Christian, religion must be integrated into every aspect of its program.

### Prayer

In addition, *prayer* should be considered a basic in SDA education. This skill should be mastered and practiced by every student. Young people from their earliest years need to be taught how to communicate with God. "In him we live, and move, and have our being." It is essential, therefore, that we teach young people to be on speaking terms with Him.

Since most Adventist teachers and administrators are aware that young people learn both by observation and doing, our facilities strive to incorporate opportunities for both private and corporate prayer into the school program. Each school year incorporates one or more weeks of prayer with its opportunities for public, small group, and private prayer. The school day begins with worship

and prayer; many classes begin with prayer; students are taught to ask God's blessing on their food. Prayer forms a significant part of church services and other special meetings. Prayer bands are encouraged, as well as private devotions.

How effective is this emphasis? Perhaps a story will illustrate: Jim enrolled in \_\_\_\_\_ Academy several weeks after school opened, arriving on the second day of the fall week of prayer. The son of a prominent non-Adventist businessman in a nearby city, Jim had gotten in with the wrong crowd and had had serious problems with the law. His father discussed the matter with some leading public school personnel in the city, who suggested that Jim be enrolled in a private school. They specifically recommended \_\_\_\_\_ Academy, which they said could probably help him more than any other school, since it had high standards, a good working relationship with the state office of education, and was well known in the city.

Having been given a comprehensive, frank orientation about what was expected of him in terms of conduct and behavior, Jim was enrolled. Oddly enough, his first appointment after registration was to attend a sophomore prayer band where students served as leaders.

After a stirring presentation, the young people knelt to pray. Jim knelt with them. God's Spirit moved powerfully through these teenagers' prayers. Jim seemed visibly moved by the experience, and despite some problems, he completed the school year successfully. Later he was baptized, graduated from academy and college, and currently serves as an SDA minister.

Prayer indeed changes things. It must continue to be a basic of SDA education.

However, prayer skills do not

come naturally. They must be taught. The prayer experience must be alive and meaningful. Although ritualistic prayers are ridiculed by young people, this type of prayer can easily become a routine in their prayer lives. A "bless the missionaries and colporters" type of prayer will do little to strengthen the student's relationship with God.

A frequent evaluation of the success of a school's progress in teaching prayer skills will certainly be reflected in the spontaneity of students seeking prayer as a means of solving life's problems, in the fervency of students' public prayers, and in the genuineness of prayer life among faculty and students.

### Social Interaction

Witnessing and service constitute another basic skill that all students in SDA schools should master. Adventist heritage and beliefs strongly implicate the involvement of every student in the great task of "finishing the work." The school can help each student discover his or her own gifts in reaching out to other people with the hope of a soon-coming Saviour.

No student will succeed in developing a well-balanced life if he or she lives only for self. Because of the organization of our culture, a child's early life may be characterized as putting him or her mostly in the receiving mode. As young people grow and mature, their parents and teachers have the responsibility of helping them become less self-centered and more attuned to the needs of others.

Ellen White has said,

The life spent on self is like the grain that is eaten. It disappears, but there is no increase. A man may gather all he can for self; he may live and think and plan for self, but his life passes away, and he has

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nothing. The law of self-serving is the law of self-destruction.

Conversely she says that "the law of self-sacrifice is the law of self-preservation." Someone has stated this law is a rather picturesque way: "Help thy brother's boat across and lo thine own has reached the shore."

Social interaction that affords a generous opportunity for witnessing and service must continue to be a basic of SDA education.

### Critical Thinking

Analytical thinking skills must also be included in the basic skills of SDA education. The "critical thinking" movement can be traced back to the early 1940s, influenced largely by Edward Glaser's "An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking" and other studies. In recent times this area has become an increasingly more significant concern of curriculum specialists. California State University has instituted a graduation requirement in critical thinking. The California State Department of Education is preparing to test all eighth-grade pupils in three areas: reading and written expression, math, and social studies. Approximately one-third of the test items are said to be designed to test critical thinking.

In a day of "information glut" SDA students must receive preparation so that they can develop into adults who feel comfortable with and skilled in weighing and reconciling contradictory arguments and

points of view through dialog, discussion, and debate. Ellen White early admonished SDA educators to teach students to be thinkers and not mere reflectors of other men's thoughts. Yet so often educators feel more comfortable with a more narrow, cognitively oriented educational program.

While it is true that in the SDA Church many of the issues are clearly settled with a "thus saith the Lord," when it comes to implementation and application of principles, certainly rational thinking needs to be taught and utilized to a greater degree by our people.

We often hear of conflict in our church between theologians and administrators. If this is a problem, perhaps it indicates that we have not been too successful in making critical thinking a significant aspect of our curriculum.

In order to better implement this aspect of the educational program, SDA teachers should be encouraged to take some graduate work that will teach them how to isolate and distinguish issues, premises, assumptions, conclusions, and inferences and help them become more proficient in the rudiments of argument and assessment.

Perhaps a word of caution should be added regarding critical thinking skills. Ellen White had much to say against "higher criticism." In the past, thinking skills were too often based on the concept of criticism. However, more recent trends in teaching thinking skills have been built on the concept of analyzing ideas and issues from the basis of what is right about a topic. Perhaps this more positive approach could resolve some of our problems in teaching critical thinking.

### Applied Health

The health message has always been a significant centerpiece of

Adventism. From health foods to modern medical institutions, health and the medical work have truly formed the "right arm of the message." The results of more than 120 years of teaching health principles have produced church members who live significantly longer (five to seven years longer according to recent research) than the general population. Health consciousness has also had a dramatic impact on the general population. Who would have believed even a few years ago that we would see numerous laws on the national as well as the local level dealing firmly with drunk driving and giving rights to nonsmokers. Today many people in the general population are watching their intake of cholesterol and fatty foods, and exercise has become a national pastime. A vegetarian meal is an option on almost all of the major airlines, and drugs are being hotly pursued by law enforcement agencies at all levels.

At the same time, however, the teaching of health in our secondary schools has been a "ho hum" experience. Few schools even offer it as a separate subject. While allegedly integrated into other areas, in reality health education receives little attention anywhere. As far as textual material is concerned, we depend almost totally on commercial sources.

Recently a group of PE teachers attending an in-service meeting were asked if they taught health. Only about 35 percent said Yes. About 65 percent indicated that they had little or no interest in teaching the subject. Are we so games-oriented that we have lost sight of the significance of the health message? This is one area where "back to basics" certainly applies. Health should indeed be one of the basics of SDA education.

## Work Education

From its earliest beginnings the SDA school system has emphasized work education. The goal of this effort has been threefold: to encourage character development, provide students with skills essential for economic survival, and help offset the cost of Christian education.

The typical American life-style today minimizes work and accentuates amusement and recreation. The average American family, for example, spends more than seven hours daily watching television as compared with only a brief time caring for the routine duties of the home. Inventive genius and industrial output have produced automatic dishwashers, microwave ovens, trash compactors, garbage disposals, and freezers full of TV dinners, which increasingly minimize the time and effort required to perform routine home duties.

The impact of this technology has not been entirely positive. Some of the following problems are typically caused by this type of life-style:

1. *Decreased family communication.* Often the increase of leisure time results in a proportional decrease in communication between family members. They sit around the television set for hours, hardly saying a word to one another, and no longer talk while washing dishes together or cleaning the house.

2. *Poor health from a lack of physical exercise.* Labor-saving devices decrease the need for heavy exertion, promoting a sedentary life-style.

3. *A decrease in intellectual stimulation.*

4. *Alienation from spiritual values.*

The work ethic has been designed by God to minimize if not

eliminate these problems.

Practical work encourages close observation and independent thought. Rightly performed, it tends to develop that practical wisdom we call common sense. It develops the ability to plan and execute, strengthens courage and perseverance, and requires the exercise of tact and skill.

Economic survival in contemporary society still depends on the quantity and quality of work skills an individual acquires in the home and school. SDA young people especially need to develop these skills early since most must use them to offset the expense of a Christian education.

While the debate on the "new basics" continues, SDA educators should ensure that students in Adventist schools receive an education that includes religion, prayer, social interaction, rational thinking, applied health, and work education. □

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