

# Moral Development and Student Behavior Strategies for the Christian Teacher

BY LENORE SPENCE BRANTLEY

**M**ary sees a \$10 bill on the teacher's desk. She reaches to take it, but pulls her hand back when the teacher enters the room. John, who also saw the money, did not take it because he would be breaking the rules of the school. In contrast, Brian did not even consider taking the money because it belongs to the teacher and he respects her and her property.

Undesirable behavior is creeping into Adventist schools more often than we would like to admit. The Valuegenesis study pointed out some areas of concern. Although our young people do not engage in at-risk behaviors as often as the average American teenager, Adventist youth still do not function at the ideal level of moral behavior. For instance, the study found that 15 percent of Adventist seniors had used alcohol six or more times in the past year. Eleven percent had used marijuana at least once in the past year. Twenty-seven percent of the youth surveyed admitted to having had sexual intercourse before grade 12.

This same study pointed to other problem areas. Between grade six and grade 12 certain school activities had less and less impact on the faith development of our young people. For instance, 38 percent of sixth graders said dormitory or morning worship at school had a strong influence on their faith development, as opposed to 10 percent of seniors. Thirty-two percent of sixth graders said that weekly chapels at school had a strong impact on

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their faith development, compared with only nine percent of seniors. Additionally, 40 percent of sixth graders said Bible classes at school affected their faith development, contrasted with 22 percent of seniors. Finally, while 22 percent of sixth

graders felt that community outreach at school had a positive impact on their faith development, only nine percent of seniors shared that opinion.

The study recommended that we examine carefully the reasons why present religious education programs are not inspiring students in our schools. Additionally, it suggested that the school curriculum encourage student involvement in service activities.<sup>1</sup>

A 10-year study of Adventist teenagers by Roger Dudley and Janet Leigh Kangas confirms some of the Valuegenesis findings. The students were asked to rate the spiritual helpfulness of parents, pastors, and teachers. Only half of the students rated teachers as helpful, a lower rating than that given to pastors and parents.

The study further indicated that few students participate in outreach activities. Seventy-six percent of the youth polled had never taken part in youth evangelistic meetings, and 66 percent had never actively engaged in sunshine bands or prison outreach programs.

Another area of concern related to the undesirable aspects of competition. Forty-seven percent of the teens agreed or strongly agreed that their peers were a stimulus for undesirable competition. Thirty-seven percent said that teachers were a stimulus for undesirable competition.<sup>2</sup>

### **Morality and Student Development**

These concerns are strongly tied to students' levels of moral development. What is morality, and how does it relate to student behavior? Morality is a sense of right and wrong. Although we are influenced by the values of the culture in which we live, we can achieve a higher level of moral behavior by applying the principles of the Bible to our lives.

In light of the concerns mentioned above new methods and approaches are needed to foster the kind of behavior we as Adventist teachers wish to see in our students. To develop new methods, we must understand the moral development of students. Moral development can be defined as the transition over time of a person's principles of right and wrong conduct and character.

## *Many disciplinary approaches to student behavior are merely band-aid techniques.*

### **Levels of Moral Development**

American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg has defined three levels of moral development. He contends that people in every culture develop morally through a set sequence, though not necessarily at the same rate. He called the levels pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. Each level deals with the person's motive for behavior.<sup>3</sup>

At the pre-conventional level (five to 12 years of age) the child's motives are avoiding punishment or getting something in exchange. For instance, in the illustration of Mary, she did not steal the teacher's money simply because she feared punishment if caught. At the same level of moral development, a student may promise to help a friend with math if she helps him with English. At this level, moral behavior is based on the premise of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." Values such as loyalty, fairness, and justice do not influence actions.<sup>4</sup>

At the conventional level (13 to 16

### **THREE LEVELS OF MORAL REASONING**

#### *Preconventional*

One acts in order to avoid punishment or to get something in exchange.

#### *Conventional*

One acts in order to be nice, to be accepted by the group, or because it is the law.

#### *Postconventional*

One acts because society as a whole benefits and because the choice is universally right.

years of age) students' motivation is to be nice, to be accepted by the group, or to obey the law. To gain popularity, teens will submit to peer pressure and act in ways that are contrary to their moral beliefs. Other teens may behave morally only because the rules demand it. Like John, they would not steal the money from the teacher's desk because the commandment says, "Thou shalt not steal."

At the post-conventional level (16 years of age to adult) students follow society's rules, based on biblical principles. At this level, students are aware of the personal values and opinions of others. They have achieved mutual respect for others. They obey because of their strong belief in the golden rule. They are motivated by inner principles rather than external pressures. Brian, who would not think of stealing the teacher's money, functioned at the post-conventional level.

Kohlberg's levels have received some criticism. Carol Gilligan, an American psychologist, contends that there is a difference in the moral development of males and females. Kohlberg used only males in his original research on moral development. Gilligan's studies found that in females higher levels of moral development correlated with care for others. According to Kohlberg's model, this would be typical of conventional behavior. Other researchers feel that all cultures may not develop morally in exactly the same way.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of these criticisms, Kohlberg's levels are still the ones most used in research on moral development. He asserts that, as individuals grow morally, they move from being self-centered to other-centered. Kohlberg cites several individuals as having attained the highest levels of moral development. These persons are Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Jesus Christ.

### **Moral Development and Student Behavior**

Why is moral development an important influence on student behavior?

- First, many disciplinary approaches to student behavior are merely band-aid techniques. They do not deal with the cause of the problem. Any behavior change that results is temporary and does not generalize to other moral dilemmas.

- Second, lasting change must come from the heart. When a person is convicted from within of the rightness of an action, then he or she will behave accordingly.

- Third, the kind of conviction and change that comes from within will set the pattern for one's life direction.

### Effective Strategies

Here are some effective strategies that can be used to enhance moral development among Adventist youth in our schools.

1. Role playing has been successfully employed at both the elementary and secondary levels. For instance, students can act out scenes from the life of Christ. Lessons should be taken from Bible stories that clearly illustrate higher levels of moral behavior.

Elementary children can portray Jesus and the respect He showed His parents as a child. Our Saviour obeyed His parents not because He feared punishment, but because He genuinely loved them and wanted to please them. Older students can choose scenes from the life of Christ during His young adult years. They can put themselves in Christ's place as He related to people such as Mary Magdalene, Peter, and Zaccheus. Following the role playing, students can discuss the biblical principles on which Christ based His behavior.

Having students role play situations requiring moral decisions may help them to transfer these behaviors to real life. They can write and role play situations based on their personal experience. Possible topics include temptations in the areas of substance abuse, premarital sex, cheating, lying, stealing, and disrespect for individual rights. Each role-playing exercise should be followed by a discussion.<sup>6</sup>

2. Students will attain higher levels of moral behavior if they become more concerned about the needs and opinions of others and less competitive. This goal can be accomplished in a number of ways. First, teachers can utilize more cooperative learning activities. The University of Chicago has developed a program called "For Character," which honors schools that are doing an exceptional job of developing student character. This program honors the group rather than individuals.

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When the whole group is honored, then the members of the group are motivated to work together for the success of the group. "When only individuals are recognized there are fewer incentives for pupils to display empathy, teamwork or loyalty."<sup>7</sup>

Students can also be encouraged to do community outreach. This can be accomplished on all levels and can include activities such as writing letters to the sick or bereaved, reading to the elderly, adopting a grandparent, visiting prisons, and helping clean or restore an inner-city neighborhood. These projects should be integrated into the weekly school schedule. Students might also receive credit for work at a hospital or for baby-sitting for a single parent.

3. Moral development can also be enhanced by using character-building stories. A wealth of these can be found in the Bible and in series such as *Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories*. Students can be assigned to find stories in the newspapers that illustrate different levels of moral behavior.

4. School workshops offer an excellent opportunity to teach moral principles. Many schools use junior devotional readings. Rita Henriquez-Roark from the Carolina Conference headquarters has written a book of worship talks for schools entitled *Wisdom Through Character Training*, which introduces one character trait per week. The book outlines a variety of worship activities for the week that help reinforce the concept.

Finally, the most powerful force in helping our young people develop higher

levels of moral reasoning is the example of the Christian teacher. "If children are to be taught cooperation and helpfulness, then teachers must model such conduct in their own professional relations. If children are to be taught dedication, then staff members must be dedicated and prepared to display their commitment."<sup>8</sup>

Mrs. White says that "The teacher can gain the respect of his pupils in no other way than by revealing in his own character the principles which he seeks to teach them. Only as he does this in his daily association with them can he have a permanent influence over them for good."<sup>9</sup> Christian teachers achieve this positive influence by becoming acquainted with the true Model for moral behavior, Jesus Christ. They can accomplish this by immersing themselves in God's Word.<sup>10</sup>

Altering student behavior is a challenge for Christian teachers. Lasting change will occur only when there is a change in thinking that results from an inner change. Strategies that enhance moral development can help build characters for eternity. ✍

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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