Can We Trust Our Kids?

By David R. Streifling

"You can't trust a one of them," declared a veteran colleague.

"You can't trust a one of them," declared a veteran colleague. That was 30 years ago. I was in my third year of teaching. The teaching staff at our school were discussing the perceived lack of honesty among the students. I had the 7th and 8th graders—generally regarded the most untrustworthy of the entire lot.

As a relative newcomer to the teaching profession, I looked up to senior teachers with a respect akin to reverence. But that comment by a senior colleague offended my innate trust of my students. Yet I wondered if I were being naive and gullible.

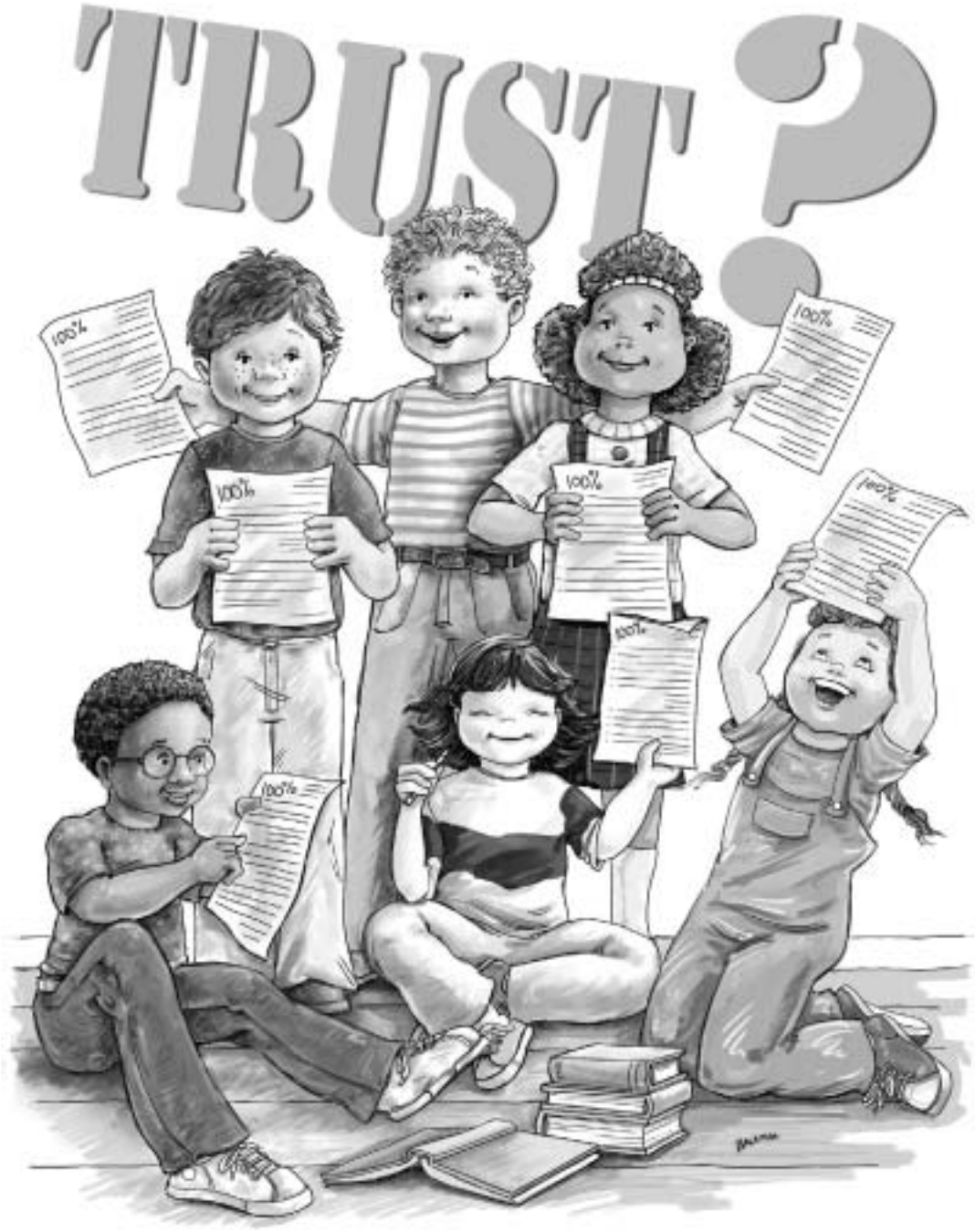
"If you could construct a test for integrity and give it to your kids in a way that ensured they did not know you were testing their honesty, you'd discover that virtually every one of them would cheat—if they thought they could get away with it," continued my pessimistic colleague. "But then, you really don't want to know the truth." This last comment was directed not at me in particular, but at teachers in general, recognizing that it was really much more comfortable to believe that most of our students are basically honest. And because honesty was in the affective domain, how could one construct a valid test to measure it?

Over the next few weeks, the discussion continued to haunt me. There had to be a way to tell if students were honest. But then, maybe, as that veteran teacher had said, I really didn't want to know. Nonetheless, a strategy began to develop in my mind.

Although not truly scientific, my test would at least give me some indication. I'd administer a test, make copies of it, and then let the students grade their own work. It was so simple, I wondered why nobody had thought of it before (this was in the early days of the thermo-fax machine, the forerunner of the photocopier). If they changed their answers, I would know!

The Original "Honesty Test"

Without sharing my plans with anyone, I prepared a simple 20-item multiple-choice mathematics test. I deliberately included questions whose difficulty ranged up through the end of high school to ensure that no student would be able to achieve a perfect score. The population sample



consisted of my entire class of 14 students. Among the group were several whom I anticipated would disappoint me.

On the pre-determined day, I chose the regular math period, just before morning recess, to administer my "research instrument." I stressed the importance of each one doing his or her best. I stated that this was a very significant evaluation, thus setting high performance expectations. I also advised them that some of the questions would be too difficult, and that I did not expect anyone to answer all of them correctly. They were instructed to record their responses in pencil, so that erasing would be easy if they needed to change an answer (and although I did not say so, it would also make it easy to make changes later).

I set a time limit, and testing began. I moved among the tightly spaced desks as I usually did during tests. After the exam, the students went outdoors for recess, and I made a copy of each answer sheet. After recess, I returned the original answer sheets, asking the students to carefully grade their own tests as I read the correct answers. Then they were to record their score out of a possible 20 points. I remained at my desk at the front of the classroom during the entire grading process—allowing ample opportunity for them to change their answers, with very little likelihood of detection. No one had any reason to suspect the existence of

the recent photocopies. Since self-evaluation of work was a normal routine in my classroom, it raised no questions. That night, I meticulously compared their self-graded original answer sheets with the photocopies. Any changes during the grading process would have supported my cynical colleague's distrust of student integrity.

Imagine my relief and excitement when I discovered that not one answer had been altered by any student. This had occurred in spite of extreme pressure to perform well on a test that was probably unfair because it was too difficult; and in spite of ample opportunity to "cheat." With pride, the following day I announced that everyone had achieved 100 percent! Then, in response to their bewilderment, I explained that the test had not been a test of mathematical skills at all, but of honesty. They had re-affirmed my faith in kids. I believe that the dynamic described in the following comment by Ellen White had been at work: "Lead the youth to feel that they are trusted, and there are few who will not seek to prove themselves worthy of the trust" (*Education*, p. 290).

But that was 30 years ago. My study population came from a rather tightly knit Seventh-day Adventist community of above-average families. Have times changed so that our young people today are being placed under ever greater pressure to achieve and to conform, and so that even good Adventist families are accepting a lower standard of morality? And so more recently, I undertook a similar study, using a larger population sample. These were also students in a Seventh-day Adventist church school; but in a different cultural and geographical setting, nearly halfway around the world.

Before presenting the findings of this recent study, however, let me share two related incidents from my classroom experience in the intervening years. The first illustrates the importance of being certain of the facts—even sometimes accepting the word of a child above the evidence of one's own senses. And the second suggests that at times it may be better to leave a particular problem unresolved than to risk punishing an innocent child—leaving certain things in the hands of an omniscient God.

Imagine my relief and excitement when I discovered that not one answer had been altered by any student.

Not Believing Our Senses

It was a sunny winter afternoon in my Canadian classroom. My students were working on social studies projects in small groups around the perimeter of the room. I was seated at my desk, catching up on some grading. As I glanced up from my work, my attention was drawn to the face of 6th-grade Bobby* in semi-silhouette against the obscured glass of the windows. Even in the backlighting, I plainly saw that he was talking. And I heard a couple of forbidden four-letter words.

"Bobby," I gasped, trying not to sound too surprised or disappointed. You see, Bobby came from a highly respected Seventh-day Adventist family. His father was a hard-working tradesman, his mother a professional homemaker. Their support of the school was exemplary. It was a sacrifice for them to send Bobby and his little sister to church school. Both parents held high expectations for their children. I knew they would be as disappointed as I to hear such language coming from their son, and I had never before heard him used such words.

"Bobby, come here." He obeyed immediately.

Softly I asked, "What did I hear you say?" His face wore a puzzled expression.

"Sir, I was just doing my assignment. We were talking about our project. . . .Why, what do you think I said?"

"Come on, Bobby. You know very well what you said." (I did not want to "dirty" my own mouth by repeating what I had heard.)

"Sir," he persisted, "I didn't say anything bad."

And now, it appeared that he was adding lying to his list of crimes. Somehow, I wanted to believe him because he was usually so well behaved. To make it easier for him to tell the truth, I decided to remove him from the classroom to the

Picture Removed

* Names used in this article are pseudonyms.

relative privacy of the school entryway (we had no office in the school). But the more pressure I applied, the more distressed he became, all the while adamantly insisting that he had said nothing inappropriate.

The situation was getting very bad. I felt like crying, too. I loved that boy, and couldn't allow him to develop the trait of dishonesty. But I was sure I had the evidence. Possibly I should simply punish him, clear the air, and get on with school work. I knew his parents would accept my testimony of what I had seen and heard, and I knew that Bobby's punishment at home would greatly exceed any that he might receive at school.

Then I found myself doing something I had never considered before. Placing my hand on the shoulder of the sobbing boy, I said, "Bobby, here's what I am going to do." He listened carefully. "I am going to choose to believe you this time. Because I have never known you to tell a lie before, I am going to ignore the evidence of my senses. We are going to go back to class and carry on as if this never happened. But I will be praying that God will give me some evidence as to whether I have made the right decision."

He appeared immeasurably relieved. And in the succeeding weeks, he continued to be a model student. I prayed about it for awhile and nearly forgot the incident. Then one day, five or six weeks later, it was as if God was providing me with a delayed "instant replay." It was the same time of day, the same lighting, the same people grouped together around the small tables working on social studies projects. Again, as I glanced up from my desk, I saw Bobby's mouth move. I heard the same words as on the previous occasion. Immediately, I called him to my desk.

"Bobby, do you remember when we talked about your bad language a month or two ago? Remember, I promised you that I would ask God for evidence? Now I have it. What was it that I heard you say?" Again he looked puzzled, almost uncomprehending.

Then, grasping the significance of the situation, he pleaded, "Sir, please, what is it that you think I said?" Reluctantly, I spelled out the four-letter words I had heard. And then to my surprise, from another part of the classroom another student volunteered, "Oh that, Sir—I said that!" It was 8th-grade Ryan,* whose fisherman father was not a practicing Christian. Ryan had picked up much of his vocabulary while fishing with his dad. I thanked him, praising him for having had the courage to "own up," and silently thanked God that I had chosen to believe Bobby on that earlier occasion.

In retrospect, apparently some random combination of the acoustics, the unusual lighting, and the activities of the different students had created a situation that deceived the senses—twice. But I shudder to think of the possible consequences to Bobby had I persisted in my earlier course, believing what I had heard and refusing to be guided by a "sixth sense."

More recently, I undertook a similar study, using a larger population sample.

Teachers Are Not Omniscient

A number of years later, in another province, two of my larger 7th- and 8th-grade boys had been detained for some minor infraction. It was quickly determined that each would be required to write out 50 lines. (It is not my purpose in this article to discuss the relative merits of any specific form of discipline.) As I turned to write the required wording on the chalkboard, I felt something whiz past my left ear. It struck the chalkboard and fell to the floor—a Pink Pearl eraser. Instinctively, I checked the classroom door, looked up and down the hallway and at the classroom windows, noting that the window screens were in place, and no other students were in the vicinity. The offender had

Picture Removed

to be one of the two boys in the classroom. But which one, I could not determine. The "missile" had come and gone so quickly that I had no time to calculate angles. Every student owned a similar eraser, and even so, it might have been "borrowed" for this purpose. I could not be sure. However, based on previous experience and general character assessment, I could deduce which of the two was more likely to do such a thing. (Teachers are good at this—it's known as prejudging.)

Based upon my professional "prejudgment," Jonathan* was clearly the more likely suspect. Although the son of one of our local pastors, Jonathan had been adopted into the family at about six years of age. He did just enough work to get by in class and regularly got into trouble in an endless variety of ways. Tyler* was different. His father served on the school board. His mother was the Home & School leader. He was admired by his fellow students. Often serving in student leadership roles, he usually managed to stay out of trouble. Tyler's grades were high, and parent-teacher conferences were a joy, a veritable celebration of his success.

But before final disposition of the case, I wanted the culprit to admit his guilt. And so, to confirm my suspicions, I asked: "Who threw that eraser?"

Both boys answered, "I didn't."

I asked each boy separately, "Did you throw the eraser?" Again, each denied it and refused to indict the other.

I was getting nowhere. It was the classical case where one person was lying and the other was telling the truth, with no way to distinguish which was which. I weighed my options. I could detain them every noon hour until one confessed his guilt—but under that kind of pressure, how could I be certain that the innocent wouldn't cave in first, telling a lie simply to get the problem to go away? And why should the innocent one be detained at all? So I told them the story of Bobby, acknowledged that I was not omniscient, and assured them that I would choose to continue to trust each of them, asking God to provide the evidence I needed in His own time. In a short while, I completely forgot the incident, but God did not.

Several years later, one of these boys, then an academy senior, was participating in his school's band and tumbling team. I was working in another conference more than a thousand miles away. Their spring tour brought them to our area. The group's Saturday evening performance was a delight. I took personal pride in the fact that I had helped put this particular student on the road to musical success, and the memory of that unpleasant earlier episode never entered my mind. When after the performance, I finally made my way to the parking lot, I did not realize that I was being followed until I heard a voice behind me.

"Mr. Streifling?" It was my former student.

"Yes. Good to see you, man. Your group did a fantastic job this evening!"

"Mr. Streifling, I need to talk to you."

Picture Removed

"Is right here OK?"

"Mr. Streifling, do you remember that time back in seventh grade. . .?" And slowly, with his help, my memory was refreshed. "Well, I want to tell you that I was the one who told the lie. . . ." Here he was, years later, wanting to set the record straight and asking my forgiveness. The Holy Spirit had not forgotten, even if I had!

I looked him in the eye and replied, "Young man, I'm proud of you. I had completely forgotten about that incident back in grade school. What you have just done is not easy to do. It is the sign of a maturing Christian. And I want you to know that in my book, tonight, you stand a mile tall!"

My heart is happy as I look back at that incident and realize that when we are not certain, God can bring certainty. But if I had tried to use my limited human judgment, a teacher and two boys would all have been hurt, for the young man in the parking lot that evening was not Jonathan, it was Tyler!

The Recent "Honesty Test" Results

And now to the results of that more recent "honesty test." The process was virtually identical to the test of 30 years ago, except that since these were not my own students (I now teach at the graduate level), I had to secure the cooperation of their home room teachers. Two classrooms were involved. In both, students frequently marked their own work, much as mine had done 30 years previously. They had no reason to suspect that their answers might be recorded. Out of the 49 7th- and 8th-graders in this sample, 48 did not change any of their incorrect answers to improve their scores. Regrettably, one did: but *only one*!

Considering the larger size of the second group of test subjects, there is really no significant difference between the test results of 30 years ago and those of the present.

One day, five or six weeks later, it was as if God was providing me with a delayed "instant replay."

Implications

The stories of Bobby, and of Jonathan and Tyler are only two incidents gleaned from my 17 years in the junior high classroom. These stories are the exception, not the rule. For the most part, my experience has confirmed that in dealing with students, teachers need to continue to be vigilant, as "wise as serpents and harmless as doves." They will also need to continue to be loving and sympathetic about the idiosyncracies of childhood. We're not talking here about a new approach to classroom management or disciplinary issues. I'd like to encourage my fellow teachers to take heart—to keep trusting God and the children whom He has entrusted to our care.

These stories also demonstrate that sometimes we find ourselves in situations where we really have no choice but to trust our kids—because God is the only one who knows the whole truth! However, as teachers, we often feel we have to know all the answers so we can deal with discipline matters promptly and fairly. As a result, we make decisions based on partial or faulty evidence. As a result, how many times have we all concluded that we cannot trust the kids and moved to bring closure to a situation prematurely?

I have cited two "success" stories, but how many "failures" there have been over the years, only God knows! Only as we maintain a moment-by-moment connection with the Infinite can we be assured of making fewer mistakes. That is the real challenge.

Can we trust our kids? Trusting is both an attitude and a choice. And sometimes, when we choose to trust kids, they will take advantage of us, they will embarrass us and make us appear incompetent. But what are the potential consequences of not trusting them?

I believe that the real question is: **Can we afford *not* to trust our kids?** The alternative is too freighted with potentially tragic consequences—what will we say when we stand before the Eternal Judge who sees clearly the connections between cause and effect? By choosing not to trust, we lose much and gain so little. But perhaps the best reason for maintaining an attitude of trust is summarized in the Ellen White quotation previously cited. Here is the full paragraph:

The wise educator, in dealing with his pupils, will seek to encourage confidence and to strengthen the sense of honor. Children and youth are benefited by being trusted. Many, even of the little children, have a high sense of honor; all desire to be treated with confidence and respect, and this is their right. They should not be led to feel that they cannot go out or come in without being watched. Suspicion demoralizes, producing the very evils it seeks to prevent. Instead of watching continually, as if suspecting evil, teachers who are in touch with their pupils will discern the workings of the restless mind, and will set to work influences that will counteract evil. Lead the youth to feel that they are trusted, and there are few who will not seek to prove themselves worthy of the trust (Education, *pp. 289, 290*).

Dr. David R. Streifling *spent 17 years teaching in middle-grade classrooms, and another 15 in instructional supervision and university teaching. His article, "Facilities Do Teach!" appeared in the October/November 2003 issue of the* JOURNAL. *Dr. Streifling writes from Lacombe, Alberta, Canada.*