

A D V E N T I S T

CHOICES

The Relationship Between Adventist Culture and Adventist Education

PART 2

In the first installment of this two-part article (available at <https://jae.adventist.org/2020.82.3.5>), readers were introduced to the design and methodology of a study that examined Adventist culture within the continental United States—its roots, its ramifications, and its relativity among church members.

Every community has its own culture—born out of shared experiences, shared language, shared customs—and the Seventh-day Adventist Church is no different. If asked, American adult church members may reference haystacks or wading, but not swimming, on Sabbath. They may argue passionately about preferences for one type of vegetarian meat over another or whether the Rook card should be high or low in this popular card game. They may reminisce about academy field trips, academic decathlons, camping trips, or banquets while they were attending one of the church's higher education institutions; however, as discussed in the first article, these are *cultural* matters.

My research focused specifically on this paradigm of Adventist culture. To begin, I wanted to find out if it even existed.

It's one thing to discuss anecdotes over potluck, it's another to produce empirical evidence. But if Seventh-day Adventist Church members in America do have a shared culture—which is what I hypothesized—I wanted to take an additional step and examine the strength of various individuals' cultural leanings and its effect on behavior—namely, school choice.

This article will share the results and findings of my research, assess the ramifications for school choice, and provide some thoughtful discussion on ways in which to best use this data at the local level. This study was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shift to virtual learning, and so recommendations for application are specific to face-to-face, in-person learning environments.

Results

For a more complete picture of the study, it is helpful to first understand the demographic makeup of those who responded. The criteria for the survey¹ was (a) member of a local Seventh-day Adventist Church in the United States and (b) a parent of a K-12 school-aged child in the 2017-2018 school year.

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Of the total respondents,

- 82.7 percent were between the ages of 36 and 55;
- 86.7 percent were married;
- 81 percent had a bachelor's degree or higher;
- 61 percent had an annual income of over US\$80,000²;
- 75 percent were white, 13 percent were Hispanic, 9 percent were Asian, and 5 percent were African American;
- 19 percent had never attended a K-12 Adventist school, 20 percent had attended a K-12 Adventist school for a few years, and 61 percent had attended a K-12 Adventist school for most or all of their elementary and secondary experience.

Moving past descriptive analysis and into a more granular examination of the data, I referred to my original research questions. First, **How does school choice differ among Adventist parents?** As it turns out, there were several factors that emerged from the factor analysis that proved to have a significant relationship to school choice.

There was a correlation between a parent's own educational context and school choice for his or her children (Figure 1). Of all of those who attended an Adventist school for even part of their elementary or high school experience, more than 60 percent chose to put their child in a K-12 Adventist school. By contrast, only 20 percent of those parents chose a non-Adventist school for their child.³

Income also emerged as a significant factor for school choice. As seen in Figure 2, parents who reported earnings of less than \$40,000 per year were far less likely (6.2 percent) to put their child in an Adventist elementary or secondary school, or to homeschool him or her, than those who made more than \$121,000 (29.9 percent). However, there was very little difference in school choice when comparing the middle-income brackets—\$40,000 to \$120,000.

In the survey instrument, respondents were asked to indicate on a sliding scale of 0-100 percent the percentage of Adventist friends and co-workers they had. In the process of cleaning the data, I categorized the responses as 0-49 percent and 50-100 percent. This proved to be a significant factor for school choice. Parents who were immersed in an Adventist social network were four times more likely to enroll their child in an Adventist K-12 school than in a non-Adventist school (Figure 3). They were also twice as likely to choose an Adventist school as their counterparts who did not have as many Adventist personal or professional relationships.

Another variable (the union where the respondent lived) was also significantly associated with school choice ($p < .01$). This categorical variable separated respondents into groupings using the eight geographic regions in the North American Division that are located in the United States. (See Figure 4.) In general, it appeared that though most American Adventists surveyed sent their children to a K-12 Adventist school, there were variations among the unions.

My second research question focused specifically on the relationship between the strength of cultural identity and school choice: **How does the degree of cultural consonance to the Seventh-day Adventist model relate to consumption behavior as seen in school choice?** The purpose for developing the cultural domain and scale to begin with was so that

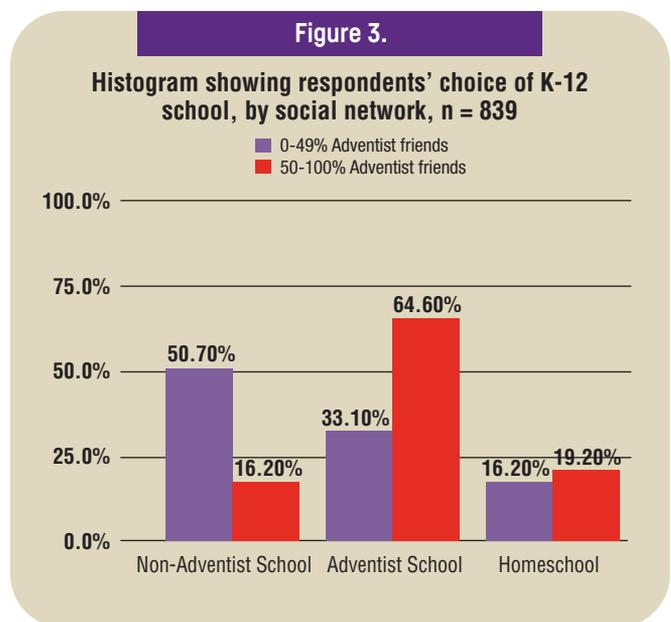
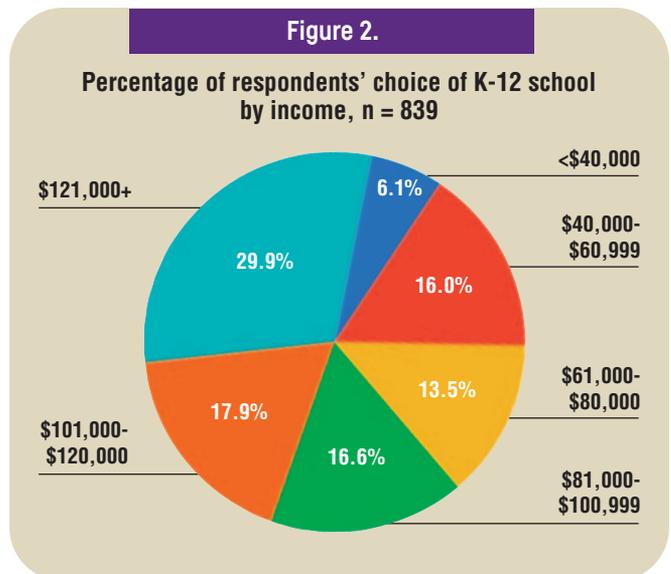
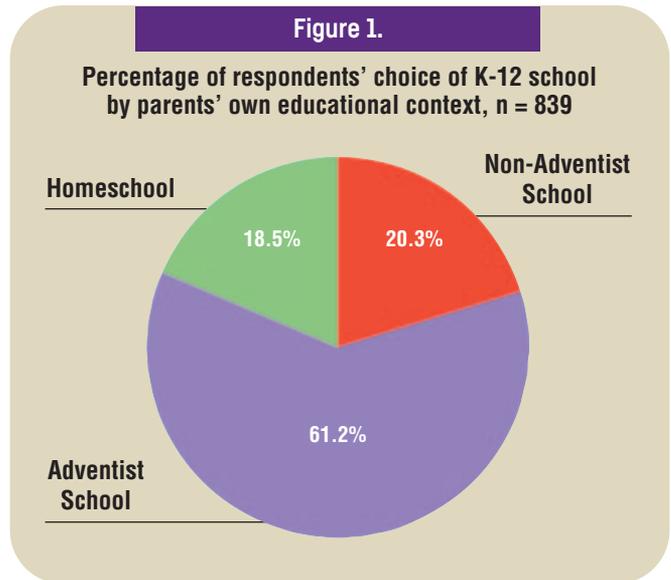
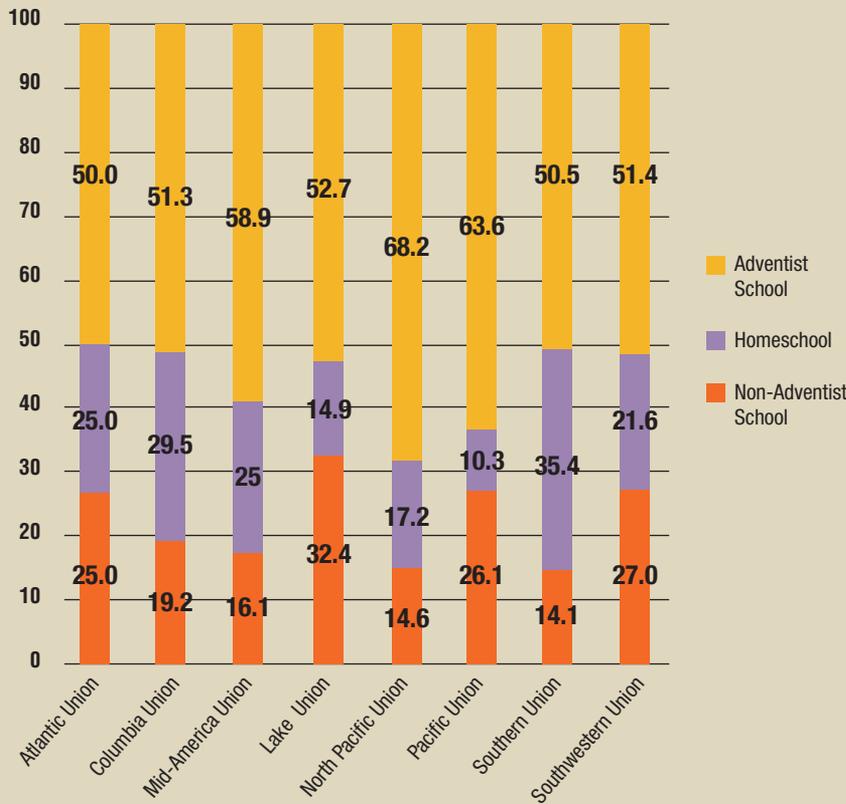


Figure 4.

Histogram showing respondents' choice of K-12 school, by social network, n = 839



I could develop a gauge with which to *measure* cultural identity. But to further discover whether the *degree* of cultural identity is related to school choice, the cultural identity variable was first stratified into three categories—low, average, and high. Respondents in the low category were those who exhibited a low degree of cultural consonance (identity); that

is, they did not often or generally practice or live out the cultural norms, traditions, or expectations of the Seventh-day Adventist culture. The thresholds for each category were chosen by first examining a histogram of all respondents' cultural consonance score. Because of the rough curves noted in the histogram as depicted in Figure 5, it was decided that "low" = < -55, "average" = -54.99 - 34, and < 35+ = high cultural consonance.

With the data derived from the survey results, I could categorize respondents as having high, medium, or low levels of cultural identity. So there *was* a difference between those who had a strong identity with Adventist culture and those who did not.

With the cultural consonance variable stratified, cultural consonance and school choice were examined within a cross-tabulation. Respondents who exhibited low cultural consonance were less likely to send their children to an Adventist school than those with average or high cultural consonance. However, those who exhibited the *most* cultural consonance did not have the highest percentage of children enrolled in an Adventist school; rather, those in this category had the highest percentage of homeschooled children.

Those who demonstrated an average degree of cultural consonance were the most likely to send their children to an Adventist school. A simple visual representation is provided in Figure 6. Those with low cultural identity tended

Figure 5.

Histogram depicting cultural consonance scores for all respondents, n = 914

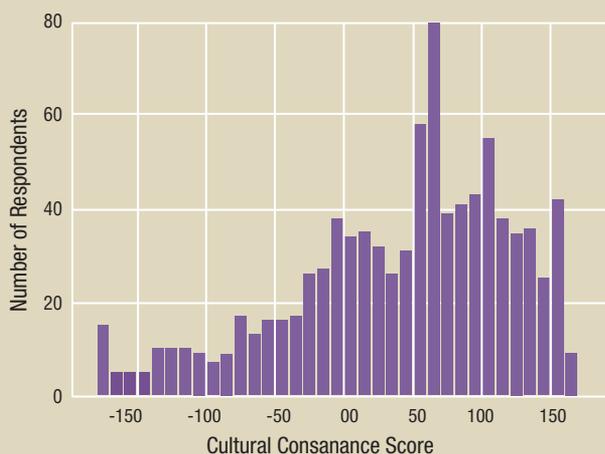
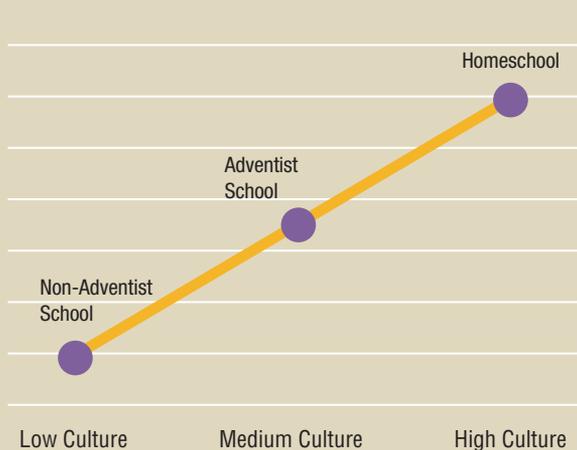


Figure 6.

Line graph depicting the relationship between K-12 school choice and culture, n = 839



to enroll their children in a non-Adventist school, those with average cultural identity chose Adventist schools, and those with the highest levels of cultural identity homeschooled their children.

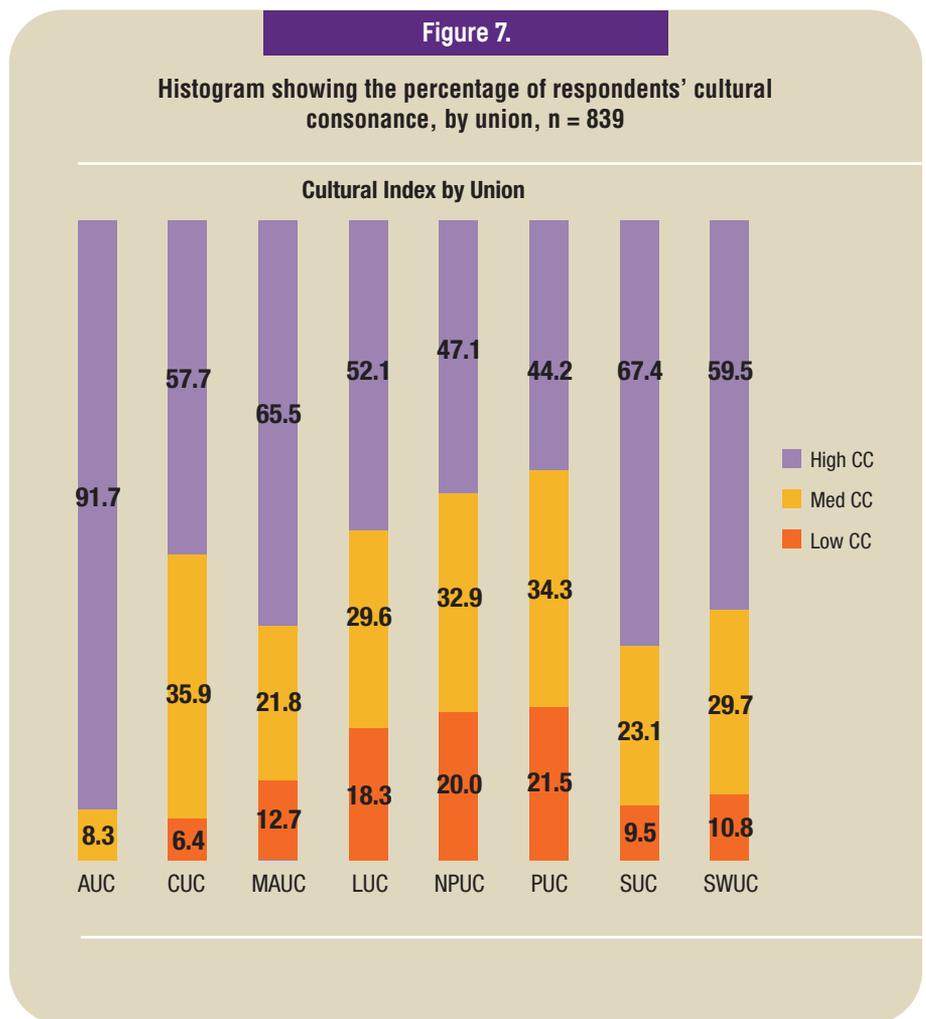
With these findings, we can circle back to the stratification by union and assess strength of cultural identity through this framework. Figure 7 indicates that the Atlantic Union and Southern Union had the highest percentage of respondents with high levels of cultural identity. Looking at Figure 4, those two unions also had high percentages of those who chose to homeschool—which certainly helps to validate the connection proposed by this study regarding Adventist culture and school choice. Furthermore, Lake Union and Pacific Union both had the highest percentage of respondents with low cultural identity—and corresponding high percentages of non-Adventist school attendees.⁴

Discussion

In this study, I posited that school choice is an extension of one’s religious and cultural identity, and so hypothesized that capturing religious and cultural profiles of parents would yield valuable insights into their choice of a K-12 school for their child, as evidenced by the third and final research question: **To what extent does a Seventh-day Adventist parent’s general religiosity, doctrinal commitment, and church identity—as represented through cultural consonance—predict the choice of school for his/her child?** And the results certainly provided several findings to unpack and examine more closely.

When looking the respondents’ *educational background*, the data demonstrated that those who had themselves spent time in an Adventist school were more likely to enroll their child in an Adventist school (61.2 percent) than those who had no previous experience with Adventist education (51.5 percent). Furthermore, there was a significant association between school choice and the respondents’ own educational background ($X^2 = 31.423, p < .01$). This indicates that the more years American Adventists had spent in a K-12 Adventist school, the more likely they were to send their children to a K-12 Adventist school, an observation that aligns neatly with other findings that graduates of other faith-based schools were more likely than their counterparts who attended public schools to send their children to faith-based schools.⁵

There could be several elements involved with this vari-



able. To begin with, it may point to a level of familiarity or inclusion in regard to respondents’ experiences in the Adventist educational system. In 2016, the Center for Research on K-12 Adventist Education (CRAE) conducted an informal poll, asking Seventh-day Adventist Church members in the NAD why they believed in Adventist education. The results were tabulated into a marketing piece that touted the top “100 Reasons for Adventist Education.”⁶ Of the hundreds of answers that poured in to the CRAE office, at the top of the list was the idea of being surrounded by like-minded individuals. Comments to this end included:

- Students are invited into a family of Seventh-day Adventist peers and teachers;
- To be with like believers;
- An extension of the values that are taught in the home;
- Students in Adventist education either share your morals, or understand why you choose to live the way you do;

These statements, albeit collected informally, seem to correspond with the idea that the experiences these respondents had in an Adventist school were comfortable and familiar and that they would want their child to have similar experiences—akin to the “we like what we know, and we know what we like” mentality.

This data also imply that not only was the experience familiar, but that it was positive. One's own attendance in an Adventist school, especially if a positive experience, seems to lead a person to consider that option more strongly for the next generation.

From a marketing standpoint, this also seems to be something worth looking at more carefully. Recruiters for Adventist education need to ask alumni this question: What *were* the positive experiences in your experience at an Adventist school? What types of memories from an Adventist K-12 school should continue to be made and perpetuated? What elements of Adventist education from 20 to 30 years ago should be retained?

Another variable emerged that speaks to the differences in members of the American Adventist Church is the geographic locale, as defined by the boundaries of *unions*. There was a significant association between *union* and *school choice* ($X^2 = 55.311$, $p < .01$), indicating that there is a relationship between where respondents live and where they choose to put their children in school. North Pacific Union had the highest percentage of respondents who chose Adventist education for their children (68.2 percent) as well as one of the lowest percentages of respondents who opted for a non-Adventist school (14.6 percent). This seems to point to a high level of commitment to Adventist education in the northwest states that make up the North Pacific Union. Interestingly enough, a few years ago, an anonymous donor covered *all* debts owed by any K-12 school in the Oregon Conference, one of six conferences in the North Pacific Union. Sheldon Eakins, a principal at one of the Oregon Conference schools, said, "Someone with a heart for Christian education wanted the school to be able to move forward and build, rather than focus on debt." This one donor's commitment to those Oregon schools seems to align closely with the rest of the union's support of Adventist education.

In the Lake Union, 32.4 percent of respondents sent their children to a non-Adventist school, the highest percentage among the eight unions. This is particularly interesting given that Lake Union is home to Andrews University and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, an educational institution that trains aspiring pastors for the world church. Having a constituent base of that nature would lead one to believe that the percentage of those choosing Adventist schools would be higher.

However, one of the emerging topics in the conversation on the declining enrollment in Adventist school in North America is the lack of participation, context, and understanding of the role of Adventist education among Adventist pastors. Recent studies show that many pastors are second-career individuals with little to no background of Adventist education themselves.⁷ For a variety of reasons, many did not attend an Adventist school in their childhood and therefore, had little understanding of or loyalty toward Adventist education as an adult.

Juxtaposed with this idea is a conversation I had with a former principal of Andrews Academy, an Adventist

academy in Michigan. She noted that there is an interesting mentality that exists in that community about Adventist and non-Adventist schools. While many members there are "staunch Adventists"—committed to the church in a variety of ways, including seminary students being educated to one day *lead* a church—they often send their children to the public school within the community because they think it is Adventist *enough*.⁸ There are a number of Adventist teachers who teach in the local public schools, and the estimate is that about 40 percent of the student population in the Berrien Springs public schools is Adventist. There is even a school bus that comes onto the Andrews University campus to pick up students and bus them to the public school in town. In a community like this one, where a school exists in close proximity to a large Adventist university or hospital, or where financing Adventist education might be challenge due to the cost of tuition not only for the children but also for the parents enrolled in higher education, many church members choose to send their children to the public schools because it *feels* Adventist. This context may explain in some part the high percentage of respondents in Lake Union who choose non-Adventist schools.

Another variable that can speak to differences among respondents is that of their net household *income*. The cost of tuition is a problem that is often cited when enrollment issues are discussed. Parents sometimes argue that the reason why they don't send their child to an Adventist school is because the financial burden is far too great. The data do demonstrate a significant association between *income* and *school choice*. Of those who choose an Adventist school for their oldest child, the respondents who reported the lowest income—\$40,000 or lower—had the smallest percentage (6.1 percent), while those who reported the largest household income—\$121,000 or higher—had the largest percentage (29.7 percent). Interestingly enough, though, among the respondents who chose an Adventist school, the \$41,000 to \$60,999 group (16.1 percent) had a higher percentage than the \$61,000 to \$80,999 respondents (13.4 percent) and similar percentages to the \$81,000 to \$99,999 group (16.9 percent) and the \$100,000 to \$120,999 group (17.8 percent).

In other words, income made the biggest difference in school choice when one compared those in the highest and lowest tiers of income, but it was not as noticeable in the middle-income groups. This would lead one to believe that while income might certainly be a determining factor for those who bring in the least income, it doesn't seem to be a significant issue for others.

Another particularly interesting element is the variable pertaining to the *Adventist social network*. The significant relationship that the data demonstrate speaks to the circle of influence that one's closest friends can exert on important life decisions. When the variable was further collapsed, the cross-tabulation showed that of those American Adventists who chose denominational K-12 schools (N = 536), 90.79 percent had a large percentage of Adventist

friends (more than 50 percent). Similarly, among the group whose friends were mostly Adventist, around 65 percent of them chose an Adventist school, while only 16 percent chose a non-Adventist school.

This seems to point to a degree of social pressure or expectation that, in this case, supported Adventist education. Social norms can have internal sanctions—for example, where one chooses to act a certain way even in the absence of others watching, such as kneeling to pray by one's bedside or not belching out loud. Social norms, however, can also exert strong external sanctions—where people behave a specific way because of the expectations of those around them.⁹ In this case, the fact that a large percentage of those who chose Adventist schools were individuals who *had* a large number of Adventist friends provides a robust example of external sanctions at work. It is easy to imagine that Church Member A, someone who lives near a large Adventist university and whose network of friends and colleagues mostly include other Adventist church members, might make different choices than Church Member B, who lives in a rural part of town and has to drive 40 miles to fellowship with other church members at the nearest Adventist church.

It is also interesting to note the converse value—almost exactly *half* of the respondents (50.7 percent) who didn't have a lot of Adventist friends (0-49 percent) chose a non-Adventist school for their firstborn. Framed in a slightly different way, if a respondent's network of friends was largely Adventist, he or she was twice as likely to send his or her child to an Adventist school (64.6 percent) versus a non-Adventist school (33.1 percent).

This social influence within cultural consonance could be particularly significant for church and school administrators interested in enrollment patterns for the Adventist educational system. The data from this study seem to indicate that a church member's adherence to Adventist doctrine is less associated with choosing an Adventist school than his or her cultural consonance score. Consequently, school recruitment campaigns aimed at Adventist church members would be more effective if they focused on fostering social and community relationships as opposed to strengthening doctrinal commitment. In other words, Adventist parents might be more likely to opt for an Adventist school if they make more Adventist friends than if they are suddenly convicted about a doctrine.

There are some aspects of Adventist culture that are more

While homeschooling in America has become slightly more mainstream, breaking from the prior stereotype of being embraced by rural, ultra-conservative, anti-government Christians—it still certainly maintains the underpinnings of alternative, perhaps even radical, mindset.

conservative than others. For instance, modesty in dress and conservative religious beliefs are generally understood as indicators of a conservative Adventist. Those two variables don't, however, show any evidence of stronger association with school choice, leading one to believe that what is understood colloquially may not actually have the expected correlation.

The data used for Figure 7 was an average of cultural-consonance (identity) scores for respondents who chose Adventist schools, non-Adventist schools, and homeschooled. Those with higher cultural consonance scores homeschooled, those with low cultural consonance scores enrolled their children in non-Adventist schools, and those with moderate cultural consonance scores sent their children to Adventist schools.

So, what does it mean to stakeholders in Adventist education if those who are highly culturally consonant *and* those who are low in cultural consonance are less likely to send their children to an Adventist school? Schools that are within the bounds of a more liberal Adventist community or whose general Adventist population might be less conservative than the norm may

well need to find ways to promote a positive, enticing view of the school.

For instance, looking at Figure 4, church members in Atlantic Union, a region that has the highest levels of cultural identity, may be more likely to send their children to an Adventist school if one exists, than church members who reside in the Pacific Union, a region that has the lowest cultural consonance mean. School recruiters in the Pacific Union who are looking to increase enrollment on their campus may not find it as effective to promote their school's uniquely Adventist elements such as vespers every Friday night or haystack potlucks at Back-to-School Night. They might fare better emphasizing things that would appeal to a more general consumer shopping around for schools for his or her child: top-notch academics, safe environment, extracurricular offerings, etc.

Another fascinating finding within this context of cultural consonance is the component of homeschooling. The data from this study seem to parallel the generally accepted idea that parents who are more conservative will choose to homeschool. While homeschooling in America has become slightly more mainstream, breaking from the prior stereotype of being embraced by rural, ultra-conservative, anti-government Christians—it still certainly maintains the underpinnings of alternative, perhaps even radical, mindset. This study, therefore, affirms that idea that American Adventists

who are more culturally consonant—more conservative and traditional—choose to homeschool, too. Unlike the families who have lower scores of cultural identity and are seeking a school that is *not* too Adventist, these families may decline to choose Adventist schools because they think they're not Adventist *enough* or because they feel that their more-conservative belief system is not mirrored in the local Adventist school.

As I write, the United States of America is embroiled in political and societal turmoil, with arguably greater fervor and brimming hostility than has been seen in recent years. One might venture to say that the country is becoming more and more polarized—on several different levels. Perhaps the Seventh-day Adventist Church in America is experiencing its own cultural polarization. Members are either identifying more strongly with the cultural elements of the church or turning away from them completely. The window of “moderate Adventism,” it could be surmised, is shrinking. And if the preponderance of Adventist students come from families in said window, the decline in enrollment—viewed in this light—makes sense.¹⁰

Adventist education, therefore, finds itself in an interesting predicament. Should schools become *more* Adventist to draw in those on one end of the cultural spectrum, or should they try to be *less* Adventist to bring in those who have lower levels of cultural identity? What about mission schools, where parents—often not members of the church—want their children to receive an education rooted in Christian values? These are issues that have been debated for the past few decades. Some schools have chosen the former route, emphasizing principles such as healthy living, care for the environment, and other emphases. For example, Needles Adventist School in Needles, California, is unapologetic in instructing the students about the benefits of a vegetarian diet. The impact of this practice is evident in the responses from parents, many of whom are not members of the Adventist Church. On the other end of the spectrum, there are schools that choose to replace *Adventist* in their name with *Christian* or simply remove the word entirely.

It is difficult to comment on which approach is better, and the location of the school would certainly impact the decision. Some argue that moving away from the “core” of Adventism is a betrayal of the church and that schools that choose to *dilute* the Adventist message are missing the point of Adventist education. Others counter this by questioning what that crux of Adventism truly is. Surely, they protest, our church is more than just a jumble of antiquated cultural norms.

These issues raise several questions, and will continue to do so as the world is impacted by seismic economic, political, religious, and social shifts. What *is* at the heart of Adventist education? Is it important to be unique? Or does that make them merely exclusive? What is the best path? Educators could argue that the shifting culture within the Adventist Church is not a school issue, but a church issue. Does the church leadership recognize this change and understand the ramifications it is having on school choice and enrollment? Will—and should—church members find their way back to the middle?

Conclusion

The results of this study seem to indicate that cultural identity does, in fact, play a significant role in school choice. Through various analyses and correlating a number of key variables, it is clear that a parent's cultural identity affects school choice in a myriad of ways. These rough findings have certainly opened the door to examining which factors have a stronger effect on school choice than simply the school itself. As evidenced by the data, the enrollment decline in Adventist and other faith-based schools in America could be related to a change in religious culture and how members identify and live out the culture of their denomination. And while there may be several other factors to consider worldwide, including more recently the COVID-19 pandemic, both educators and church administrators might give attendance to these findings and consider the implications of church culture on their respective ministries. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.

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Recommended citation:

Aimee Leukert, “Adventist Choices: The Relationship Between Adventist Culture and Adventist Education, Part 2,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 82:4 (October-December 2020): 9-16.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Demographics for this study are described in detail in Part 1 of this article. See <https://jae.adventist.org/2020.82.3.5>.
2. The annual household income reported in this study reflects averages of the respondents for this study. For additional context, see data from the study by Sahlin and Richardson, commissioned by the North American Division, which reported an annual household income of

\$25,000 and below for approximately 40 percent of Adventist households. For 30 percent of Adventist households, the annual income ranged from \$25,000 to \$49,999. For 24 percent, this range was \$50,000 to \$99,999; and, for seven percent, this income was \$100,000 or more (Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson, *Seventh-day Adventists in North America: A Demographic Profile* [Milton Freewater, Oregon: Center for Creative Ministry, 2008], 19-21). Available at <http://circle.adventist.org/files/icm/nadresearch/NADDemographic.pdf>.

3. In this study, a “non-Adventist school” could be a public school, private non-religious school, or private parochial school.

4. This does not take into account the availability of Adventist schools in various unions, which may mean that parents choose to homeschool.

5. Jonathan Schwarz and David Sikkink, *Blinded by Religion? Religious School Graduates and Perceptions of Science in Young Adulthood* (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2016): <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/blinded-by-religion-religious-school-graduates-and-perceptions-of-science-in-young-adulthood/>.

6. Center for Adventist Research, “100 Reasons for Adventist Education” (2020): <https://crae.lasierra.edu/100-reasons/>.

7. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, “Strategic Issues

Emerging From Global Research, 2011-2013,” *Reach the World: General Conference Strategic Plan 2015-2020*: 7 (Item 2). Data from five major global studies beginning in 2011 show that “less than half of all Adventists worldwide have experienced any denominational education, and many pastors have limited Adventist education” (p. 7); Roger Dudley and Petr Činčala, “The Adventist Pastor: A World Survey.” A research study conducted by the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University’s Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, May 2013: <http://www.adventistresearch.org/sites/default/files/files/The%20Adventist%20Pastor%20A%20World%20Survey%20.pdf>; George R. Knight, “Why Have Adventist Education?” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 67:5 (Summer 2005): 6-9: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae200567050604.pdf>.

8. Name used with permission. Jeannie Leiterman, personal communication, 2018.

9. Jon Elster, “Rationality and Social Norms,” *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie/Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie* 32:1 (1991): 109-129.

10. At the time of writing, the impact of COVID-19 on school-systems, church finance, and annual household incomes, are yet to be determined, but will certainly have an impact.



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