



# BUILDING RESILIENT CHRISTIANS

## A GOAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION

**C**onnie\* was an honor roll student in her Adventist academy. Bill\* played in the band and was a class officer his senior year. Connie's parents work for the church. After graduation from academy, they married and moved to the middle of Wyoming, to be near Bill's work. The nearest church was nearly an hour's drive away, and few young people attended. The pastor's sermons were not very inspiring, and Sabbath was one of the few days they could sleep in. It became much easier to listen to a sermon on tape rather than to make the effort to attend. Sometimes Connie would plan a picnic, or they would both relax at home with a book. Gradually, the unfinished proj-

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ects of the week crept into the Sabbath hours.

Roger Dudley's 10-year study of graduates from Adventist academies<sup>1</sup> found that about 48 percent of the respondents educated in Adventist schools were no longer regularly attending church a decade after graduation. Even though many of them may return later in life, these numbers give cause for concern. The original Valuegenesis study<sup>2</sup> reported that the attitudes toward religion of students who attended

Adventist schools and those who attended public schools were not vastly different on many topics. Valuegenesis II research, however, found that Adventist students in church-operated schools were significantly more likely to uphold the doctrines of the church than Adventist students studying in public schools.<sup>3</sup>

Dudley's longitudinal research on graduates from Adventist high schools<sup>4</sup> suggests

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\* Not their real names.

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habits that are incompatible with Christianity.

3. The teachers aren't committed enough or don't really live what they believe, and students “see through” their veneer of Christianity.

4. Young people mean to stay in the church, but after they graduate, they spend a lot of time on secular pursuits, and have little contact with spiritual things. Many complain that their church is not loving, is critical of them, or does not meet their needs, and they eventually drop out.<sup>5</sup>

5. Schools are doing their best, but their methods of promoting Christianity are not effective with today's teens.

Whatever the reason, the solution is the same: Our schools need to focus on building Christians who are able to deal with difficult situations without losing their faith. We need to find out how to better educate our students so that they will become good Christians and useful citizens, and remain practicing church members throughout their lives.

The sort of individual described above could be labeled a “resilient Christian,” borrowing a term from secular educational research and applying it to spirituality. This concept could be defined as follows:

“Resilient Christians” know how to glean strength to maintain their Christian experience in whatever environment they are planted. They expect to face adversity for being different from those around them, and do not become discouraged when they discover that other Christians are imperfect examples of God's character. They maintain their



that students actually do get the message, but that when they leave school, many of them don't follow through on their decision to remain Adventists. A variety of explanations have been given for why so many youth leave the church:

1. The world is getting more sinful, and it is therefore harder to raise Christian children who stand up for what they believe.

2. Parents aren't doing their part, and the kids come to school already “pre-programmed” with ideas and

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own personal relationship with Christ, and share their love for Him with others.

“Resilient Christian people . . . cope gracefully, even elegantly”<sup>6</sup> with unexpected or unpleasant events. They are not excessively influenced by their environment, since they have learned how to depend on God for support. Resilience includes insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, and humor.

Christians who are resilient will

- ask tough questions and give honest answers;

- not avoid difficult or painful truths;
- see their circumstances realistically; and
- take responsibility, rather than blaming others for their problems.<sup>7</sup>

If we could develop this kind of student in our schools, we might possibly retain a larger percentage of them, rather than losing them out the back door of the church.

### Related Educational Research

Secular educational research may help to shed light on better ways of developing resiliency in Christian youth. Studies on curriculum and instruction, as well as research on resiliency, can help us teach spiritual concepts, as well as intellectual ones. Following is a review of selected studies, examined for their relevant applications in the area of spiritual resilience.

#### *Outcome-Based Curriculum Planning*

This desired outcome is the starting

point for some approaches to curriculum. Wiggins and McTighe<sup>8</sup> encourage teachers to build their lesson plans backward, beginning with the desired results, and trying to see what they want their assessments to look like. They then determine what sorts of activities will produce that kind of knowledge, and finally, what content will support the overall goals for the course.

This idea makes sense for Christian educators who wish to help students become and remain strong, active church members as well as good citizens of their community. We must begin by knowing where we want to end up, and then design activities and experiences that will help us get there.

If our curriculum is not achieving our goal of developing Christian young people who will “stand for the right, though the heavens fall,”<sup>9</sup> we need to change what we are doing and find or design content and activities that better achieve this goal. We need to remem-



ber that the goal is not simply having the students choose to follow Christ. Our success must be measured not by how they choose, but by whether they maintain their initial commitment. Beginning with that outcome in mind, we need to work backward, to see where to make changes that will lead to increased spiritual resiliency in our youth.

#### *Educational Effectiveness Research*

One of the basic messages of recent research on educational effectiveness<sup>10</sup> is that no matter how children enter school, they should have a chance to come out better. Sadly, until recently, students who enrolled with many advantages (socioeconomic status, intelligence, background knowledge) often graduated with the top honors, and those who came in weak emerged even weaker. In other words, schools were reproducing society, and not really giving every child a chance. This realization has changed the way schools look at success, and has encouraged many of the leading researchers and consultants to focus on how to help schools with large populations of failing students. As they have concentrated their energies on populations that have traditionally done poorly in school, they have begun to learn many new things that were not clear before:

1. Students who come from impoverished backgrounds often have inadequate family/personal support systems. Their homes and communities are often affected by physical abuse, drug and alcohol use, and emotional abuse.<sup>11</sup>

2. Such students enter school with academic weaknesses and need help to be able to do grade-level work.<sup>12</sup>

3. These students have major deficiencies in the area of vocabulary development. The average 1st grader from a middle- or upper-class home knows a minimum of 6,000 words. A child from an impoverished environment, however, may only understand and use only around 3,000 words.<sup>13</sup>

4. Researchers are finding that the single most important factor in school success is the social support of family.<sup>14</sup> Students who lack that have a big



deficit, indeed, but one that can still be overcome by providing other sources of support.

Though educators do not have any control over students' characteristics when they arrive at school, they do have a fair bit of influence over what they are like when they leave school.<sup>15</sup> Schools and teachers *can* make a difference.

Even if IQ is regarded as fixed (there are varying opinions on this), a high-quality school environment, even one with medium-quality teachers, can improve the performance of low-achieving students. The implication is that what students *don't* bring to school is the school's problem. We can't ask parents to produce higher-quality stu-

dents to make us look better—we simply need to do a good job with whatever students we get. Therefore, we need to structure each school's program to ensure that every student has a bet-

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ter chance to succeed.

In addition to a new emphasis on building background knowledge where it is absent, current research also suggests making testing more meaningful and using it as a basis for student learning. In a recent conference on teaching and learning, Wiggins<sup>16</sup> proposed doing much more assessment and less teaching, since when students are assessed early and meaningfully, the students themselves can see where and how they need to improve, and can make adjustments to help themselves reach the goal. Wiggins suggests that anything worth learning will probably take multiple attempts before it is achieved. He adds that it is not so much the original content or teaching

The implications for Adventist education are obvious: Teachers need to give pupils more feedback along the way about how they are doing in different aspects of their education, so they can make adjustments. Teachers must not simply blame society or family background for a student's lack of academic or spiritual growth. The school has to make a difference for the pupils who aren't making it on their own, not merely rejoice with those who would have done well with little help from the school. Schools need to work on developing both academic competencies and behaviors that support spiritual resilience, and seek alternative means of support when home and society don't provide enough.

schools to promote it. If we could just boil this ability down to its essence and then help students develop it, they would have a better chance at success.

Benard explains that resiliency is hard to define—like the wind, we see the results, not the actual thing. She claims that “the development of resiliency is none other than the process of healthy human development”<sup>19</sup> and therefore is not uncommon. That is, if students learn how to relate properly to their environment, they can cope with the problems that will surely face them both in their personal life and in their Christian journey.

At-risk children are often described as culturally, ethnically, or linguistically different from their peers.<sup>20</sup> These dif-

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ferences are often seen as deficits in an environment where being like others is important. Such children traditionally do not do as well in school.

The parallels with Christianity are powerful here. Are Christians culturally and linguistically different? They should be. Are they ethnically different? If they see themselves as not belonging to this world, that's exactly how they should feel. Christian students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, may well be judged as inferior because of their differences. Most certainly, they will face strong pressure from society to conform. Some students have the inner strength to stand up to that pressure; others do not.

Researchers have searched for dif-



method that motivates student learning, but rather the feedback about how they are doing that helps students the most.<sup>17</sup> Basically, when students get clearer feedback about what they are doing well and what they need to improve, this produces more effective learning. Testing should allow students to make adjustments and try again, which makes it a step in learning rather than the end of the process, when it is too late for the student to improve.

#### *Resiliency Research*

The idea of resiliency is currently receiving a lot of attention from the academic research community, which has focused on students who do well, even under difficult circumstances. They thus hope to identify and understand what factors help such students to be more resilient, so that schools can promote that type of behavior.<sup>18</sup> Adventist educators also need to better understand resiliency before we can begin to make practical adjustments in our

ferences between students who are at-risk but do well, and students who face the same difficulties but are overwhelmed by them. Resilience literature suggests that educational persistence and academic achievement correlate with participation in extracurricular activities and pride in the child's school.<sup>21</sup> Other results show that resilient students had significantly higher perceptions of family/peer support, teacher feedback, and positive ties to the school. They placed a higher value on school, peer belonging, and family than non-resilient students did. Researchers also found that students' sense of belonging at school was the only significant predictor of academic resilience.<sup>22</sup>

In their meta-analysis of research

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- a good school and classroom learning environment.<sup>24</sup>

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is one place where they are loved, accepted, and safe.

Comer<sup>25</sup> suggests that the lack of family support can be replaced in a child's life either by teachers or other caring adults. But this list of skills also shows a need for autonomy, an individual sense of where one is going and how to get there, as well as the ability to solve problems and make good use of time. Do we teach these skills in our schools? Unfortunately, I fear that we do not emphasize them enough. We often try to save our students from the world by not giving them the opportunity to interact with it and make their own choices about it. This is incredibly complex because of sinful human nature. On the one hand, students must make their own decisions about doing what is right. On the other hand, if we allow them too much freedom, they will tend to choose what is not best for them, given the sinful nature of human beings.

So what is a school to do? The resiliency literature suggests that we need to teach students how to make good decisions for themselves. This is much more difficult than simply creating a fair set of rules to follow.

### *Unconditional Teaching*

Teachers sometimes complain that students are enrolling with less and less from home (less learning, less character, less in the way of life skills) and that school is supposed to magically make up for all the things homes are failing to do. It's important to note, however, that students don't only come in with less of *everything*. They are also more diverse than before. Students are exposed to many more ideas at a young age, even within the Adventist school system, and they bring new and different skills to class than they did 20 years ago. As for what the school is supposed to do about it, it seems there really is only one answer: Either we are intentional about helping students

on resiliency, Waxman, Gray, and Padrón<sup>23</sup> attempted to summarize what is known about resilient children. They came up with the following list of personal and environmental characteristics:

- social competence,
- problem-solving skills,
- autonomy,
- a sense of purpose,
- motivation and goal orientation,
- positive use of time,
- family support, and

cations for Christian schools. If our goal is to develop resilient Christian adults who will remain true to their beliefs in spite of adversity, we need to help our students develop these characteristics. We already know that family support matters. But external support matters, too. The sense of belonging to a school was the only significant predictor of success for at-risk students. This identification with an esteemed group is important for students. They need to know that school



achieve success, or we are not. As educators, we cannot shirk our responsibility by blaming parents for not doing their part. Either we accept the challenge and do our best to ensure that all students learn, or we should find a different profession. Education is a salaried job—we are paid to get the job done, not to do only the pieces we have traditionally considered our responsibility in the past.

Secular researchers are now suggesting what Christians have known all along—helping each child reach his or her potential is a must. We cannot excuse ourselves by assuming that it is inevitable that at-risk students will fail. Our mandate is to find appropriate methods and materials to help them succeed.

This concept of accepting students as they are and teaching them whatever they need to know is referred to by some as “unconditional teaching.”<sup>26</sup> The idea here is that we don’t see students as having deficits that we have to

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“fix,” but rather, we value each individual for himself or herself. Kids need unconditional acceptance. “Unconditional teachers. . . make it clear that although there are certain expectations in the classroom—expectations that, ideally, the students themselves have helped to create—the teacher’s basic affection need not be earned.”<sup>27</sup> This does not mean there are no standards; merely that children are valued for more than their successes.

Each child should be equally important to us. The teacher “should see in every pupil the handiwork of God—a candidate for immortal honors. He should seek so to educate, train, and discipline the youth that each may attain to the highest standard of excellence to which God calls him.”<sup>28</sup> We cannot be satisfied with achieving success with only some of our students. “If some children matter more to us than others, then all children are valued only conditionally.”<sup>29</sup>

This concept of unconditional teaching is one that we need to work on as Christian teachers. It is always easier to love only the lovely and the loving, but that is not what God asks us to do. It is also easy to give students the idea that God will not love them if they participate in certain behaviors.

We need to realize that our classroom demeanor will have a deep and lasting effect on the way our students view God. If we are impatient and unkind when they fail, they may well see

### **Some things you can do to increase resiliency in your students:**

1. Make students responsible for their own behavior. Young people need to learn that achieving Christian maturity isn’t about whether or not they “get caught,” but about learning to make positive choices that will affect their future.
2. Help students learn how to make decisions about what to watch on television, what to read, what to access on the computer, etc. Don’t tell them what to do—help them learn how to decide.
3. Don’t overprotect students. Let them talk about the evils in society and understand what is wrong with certain behaviors or entertainments and why they should be avoided. Don’t desensitize them to evil by constant exposure, but help them learn to recognize evil when they see it, so they can steer clear of it.
4. Let students know that as Christians, they are walking north in a world that is going south. They need to know that they will not remain different if they simply follow the crowd and do what comes naturally.
5. Give students unconditional love and support. Resilient students usually have at least one adult who believes in them and cares what happens to them. Ideally, this includes two parents and a teacher, but any interested adult can make a difference in the life of a child.
6. Give students responsibilities to carry out. Resilient students often have at least one talent or some responsibility where they feel they make a difference to others. Give them classroom responsibilities. Encourage them to assist younger students. Schedule classroom community service projects. Make them feel needed.
7. Talk with students about what will happen when they leave the sheltered environment of Adventist schools. Ask them how they plan to handle the pressures of the secular world. Planning ahead will help them deal with difficult issues in the future.
8. Offer opportunities for students to practice their new skills. Help them to meet non-Adventist realities in safe ways.
9. Evaluate your teaching and your school’s programs. What are you doing to help students prepare to live and thrive as Christians in a secular society?
10. Search your own soul. What do you do to feed your personal spirituality in a secular world? You cannot share what you do not have.



God as being the same way. If we overlook the character flaws of the good students, that message also gets recorded. If we allow all students some freedom and the opportunity to make important decisions with the support of caring adults to help them work through the implications, they will have the opportunity to grow from those experiences. The question is not what will solve the teacher's problem in the simplest way today, but rather, what solution will produce the best long-term results for each student?

### **Developing Spiritual Resiliency in Our Students**

Developing resilient Christians is not a uniquely Adventist goal. Other Christian institutions advertise programs for those who wish to develop "an intellectually resilient Christian worldview."<sup>30</sup> But the question persists: Why are we not having greater success? We know that part of the answer is that

developing resilient young people who will not fail when faced with real-world problems is not an easy task, especially within the sheltered environment of the Christian school.

"What's required to deal with the real world cannot neatly be summarized in a theory, or by facts or by mere education. The rich range of complex and subtle skills we need can only be acquired by living in a complex set of situations and cultivating the raft of abilities such complexities require."<sup>31</sup> If we do not create these more complex situations in which our students can develop and practice real-life skills, how can we expect them to be able to cope when they leave the sheltered, nurturing environment of the Adventist school?

It is clear that, in many cases, the education we have been providing is not sufficient to prepare young people to remain faithful to God when they leave school. Of course, in a sinful

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world where the devil is actively at work, nothing that we try will be 100 percent effective. We must, however, continue to expand our concept of what constitutes good education, and what we need to do in our schools. Often, we presume "that mere education will help our children find their way in the world. The richer word instead is

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formation. Formation is both education and the shaping of the entire person so that he or she is deep in resources for coping with a world that is sometimes evil.<sup>32</sup>

Simply telling students what they should do will not produce the desired result. We need to help them develop ways of living and thinking that will get them through difficult times. They need to practice these skills, and take ownership of them.

It is crucial when contemplating how to develop a complex concept like spiritual resiliency that we do not forget our source of power. In order to develop a resilient Christian life, we need to “listen to God’s voice in Scripture daily,” and to expose ourselves regularly to “an expository teaching ministry. Without that hearts start to harden and we wander.”<sup>33</sup>

Giving students the space to develop their own values system is not as simple as removing the barriers and allowing them to choose for themselves. God has made it abundantly clear that behavior does matter to Him. He has specific, binding rules for our lives, and wants us to live within His boundaries. But within those ethical absolutes, there is still a lot of freedom for personal expression.

My challenge to Adventist educators everywhere is to help our students develop the skills they need to be resilient Christians. Help them learn to get nourishment from the Source; to accept being different from the world; not to become discouraged by other people’s failures; to be holy in a sinful world. These skills are developed through careful use and practice—and feedback. They are not often explicit in the curriculum, yet they are implicit in everything we stand for, and they are required for success in life.

As educators, we must find ways to make current educational research serve the needs of the church—not only to better our academics and teach-

ing techniques, but also to develop spiritual resilience in our students. ✍



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