



Teaching With the  
**“AFFECT TURN”**  
in Mind:

Connecting  
Theory  
With  
Practice

With an Intellectual Quotient (IQ) of 165, Theodore was a dream come true for every teacher. His inquisitive nature and academic achievements allowed him to skip two grades, enter Harvard University at age 16, and obtain a PhD in mathematics in his early 20s. However, this unique student, regarded by some as a genius, was also socially awkward and emotionally and professionally dysfunctional.<sup>1</sup> Although Theodore volunteered to be psychoanalyzed while a student at Cambridge, nobody suspected he would become a famous, menacing killer whose anonymous mail bombs would terrify large numbers of people for 17 years. According to his autobiography, Theodore Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber, killed three people and harmed at least 12 others physi-

cally in a deluded attempt to set America on a path of freedom. Technology, he argued, was enslaving humans, and the bombs he created, shipped through the mail, and which detonated in the recipients' hands, were his way of conveying a message.<sup>2</sup>

Kaczynski's morbid acts cannot be justified. He acted in an attempt not to

purge his sorrow due to mental abuse, teasing, and social incompetence, but to enhance his troubled lifestyle.<sup>3</sup> In *True Education*, Ellen White wrote that: "There is in our nature a bent to evil, a force which, unaided, we cannot resist. To withstand this force . . . we can find help in but one power. That power is Christ."<sup>4</sup> Kaczynski's case reminds us that evil exists and can exercise a controlling power over individuals whose human emotional core is neglected. And, while neglect of the affect will not turn most individuals into serial killers or terrorists, attention to affect provides an opportunity to influence the choices students will make in their lives.

Yet, expectations of quality academics, hectic schedules, important teacher benchmarks, and planned lesson objectives can impede educators

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from giving adequate attention to the “affect turn” (see Box 1) in education. Understanding affect is fundamental to helping learners understand why they have certain feelings,<sup>5</sup> and is essential in today’s classroom. Theodore Kaczynski attended school when discussions about the impact of affect and emotions were few. According to Freire, unemotional students may develop destructive behaviors and end up making threats to harm themselves or their peers. He stated, “What is important in teaching is not the mechanical repetition . . . but comprehension of the value of sentiments, emotions, and desires.”<sup>6</sup> Said another way, true education involves the appropriate development of the mental, physical, and emotional influences of a person, but above all, helps students grow in spiritual strength.<sup>7</sup> Focusing on student and teacher emotions reduces tension and helps students to become empathetic, caring adults.<sup>8</sup> Teachers can benefit from understanding and learning how to apply the latest research on the affect turn in education.<sup>9</sup>

### The Affect Theory

“Affect” is an involuntary physical reaction or response of the body to a stimulus.<sup>10</sup> Affects are links between the body and the brain that begin when the brain senses a situation that demands an emotional response.<sup>11</sup> According to Frank and Wilson,<sup>12</sup> Silvan Tomkins, the famed psychologist and personality theorist, suggested three types of affect: positive, neutral, and negative. Each of these processes occurs automatically below the level of consciousness.<sup>13</sup> Tomkins’ research led him to identify two positive affects that humans have: enjoyment-joy and interest-excitement. In the area of negative affect he identified fear-terror, distress-anguish, anger-rage, shame-humiliation, disgust, and dissimell (a reaction to an unpleasant odor), as resulting from incidents with an undesirable association. According to Tomkins, there is only one neutral affect, surprise-startle, which describes the state of instant readiness to respond.<sup>14</sup>

A total of nine universal facial expressions correspond to the various af-

fects. These common facial expressions are present in babies from birth. For example, when experiencing enjoyment-excitement, humans universally use a smile, which is characterized by the edges of lips turning upward. Gazing eyes and listening ears represent the interest-excitement affect. In contrast, fear-terror produces uplifted eyebrows and wide, shocked eyes. A negative affect, distress-anguish, is manifested with crying, a red face, and closed eyes. If distress-anguish is not appeased, babies, and even adults, turn to anger-rage, which is linked to a demanding facial expression. When shame-humiliation moves a person, the muscles of the neck soften, and the head tends to lower forward. Sometimes the person covers his or her face in an automatic hiding response. The facial expression related to disgust is a nauseated expression, commonly including closed eyes and the tongue sticking out of the mouth. This affect takes place regarding a taste, noise, or a disturbing visual. Dis-smell is a peculiar non-verbal expression that involves pulling away from an unpleasant and visible or invisible object with an unpleasant odor.

The surprise-startle affect is consid-

ered a neutral affect.<sup>15</sup> Ostrofsky explained that the visible signs of the surprise-startle affect involve “opening the eyes to get a good look, and snatching a quick breath in preparation for action as needed.”<sup>16</sup> A surprise-startle affect is a very brief, automatic manner of communicating positive or negative feelings, and thus is appropriately considered a neutral affect. Affects are the product of stimuli; they also amplify stimuli. It is important for educators to understand that these reactions are involuntary, natural responses that occur in every social interaction and all aspects of life, including educational settings.

Both educators and learners engage with the educational curriculum. But their bodies and minds demand more than a textbook, an academic objective, a benchmark, or standardized tests. Deeply complex psychological, social, and political challenges and issues are exposed in every class, every day.<sup>17</sup> Affect is a challenging subject because this phenomenon is concurrently biological (physical), neural, subjective, historical, social, and personal.<sup>18</sup>

Scholars such as Zembylas and Leys<sup>19</sup> consider the terms *affect*, *emo-*

## What Are “Affect” and “Affect Turn”?

By definition, the word *affect* refers to feelings, emotions, and attitudes held by an individual.\* The “turn to affect” in education pedagogy is an approach that encompasses the social, cultural, political, and psychological factors that impact and trigger the social and emotional beings of learners—both the teacher and the students, encompassing feelings, emotions, and attitudes. Affect studies, which rose to prominence in the mid-1990s and evolved into what is now called “social and emotional learning,” seek to delve into “how teachers and students are moved, what inspires and pains them, how feelings and memories play into teaching and learning.”† Adventist education, using a wholistic approach, promotes developing the physical, mental, and spiritual facets of each learner. Developing the mind involves academics as well as affect. The turn to affect in education is part of teaching and learning wholistically.

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†Michalinos Zembylas, “The Affective Turn in Educational Theory,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (February 23, 2021): <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1272>.

tions, and feelings to be synonymous and interchangeable. Damasio suggested that it is a difficult task to choose a single term to describe emotions or the “drives and motivations and as states of pain and pleasure”<sup>20</sup> that trigger what he classified as background, primary, and secondary emotions. In education, the concepts of affect, feelings, or emotions can be used in varying ways. Consequently, it is essential to recognize the beliefs about affect, and apply them when seeking to mend the breach of communication between educators and learners in today’s classrooms.

### The Affect Turn in Education

Multiple disciplines use affect to effectively influence people and their emotions. This influence could be positive and uplifting or negative and manipulative. Teachers and students must learn to recognize when and how affect is being used to influence decisions and choices. The entertainment business, for example, induces audiences to feel emotions through music, speech, and body movement. Filmmakers create scenes of sadness, pain, happiness, surprise, disgust to produce responses producers wish to generate. Actors not only internalize words of a script but also must find ways to express those words in believable, expressive ways using voice, hands, and facial expressions to stimulate and elicit desired responses.<sup>21</sup> Politicians use affect theory to create electoral campaigns. Expert writers and speakers prepare emotionally packed discourses using powerful words that sway the minds of listeners. Emotions are external responses to internal *and* external experiences. This means that affects trigger the body to respond in many ways such as with tears, laughter, surprise, or anger.

Massumi<sup>22</sup> believed that affect should yield a change in how students are socialized in the classroom, and this is what schools and education must attend to in the teaching and learning cycle. Certainly, how teachers

use affect can bring about change. Educators teach using words, and many times these are not entirely concrete. Words build ideas that help to shape and create the learners’ identities. Sometimes the way the words are expressed limits the possibilities of subjective and abstract thinking. Children repeat what they hear in school, at home, and on television. They repeat what affects them. At the same time, the words repeated are attached to their individual experiences. The body and mind are stimulated to

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create a reality—and they simultaneously use that reality to try to influence others.

It is because of the power of emotions that the study of affect has become the object of scholarly inquiry. Educators are “bringing together theories of subjectivity and subjection, theories of the body and embodiment, and political theories and critical analysis of affect and emotion.”<sup>23</sup> Educators are being trained to use less of what Freire called “a dominating standard discourse”<sup>24</sup> and more critical-thinking skills. This form of instruc-

tion uses feelings, ideas, and character-building skills. The affect turn in education links the emotional part of learners with societal, psychological, and the cultural aspects of learners.

The affect turn in education also addresses the relationship between emotions and what happens in teacher education. Scholars such as Gilles Deleuze, Baruch Spinoza, Lisa Blackman, and Brian Massumi suggest affect turn is more than just inserting emotion into pedagogy. Learning is a lasting modification of behavior that happens through moving experiences. An ongoing type of positive, neutral, or negative affect can shape the learner’s academic performance in positive or negative ways. In schools, educators have the power to use affect theory to address students’ emotions and influence minds with reason and passion. Care must be taken to ensure that this influence is used positively and not in a manipulative way. This approach also impacts educators because affects belong simultaneously to both sides of the relationship—teachers are both the learners and teachers.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout my long career as an elementary school teacher, I have been deeply moved by numerous, if not all, of my students. Some of these memories are narrated below because they include turning to affect to yield behavior modification, improve academic performance, address hyperactivity and attention span issues, and integrate technology. I share these to connect the affect theory with the practice of turning to affect in education.

### Make Accommodations to Facilitate Behavior Modification

Affect influences how a person encounters the world and its happy and sad realities.<sup>26</sup> Relationships are influenced by affect and the accumulation of emotional experiences by each person in the relationship. My student, Manuel,<sup>27</sup> constantly begged for attention in class. The youngest in his family, he had the attention of his parents, older siblings, and grandparents.



They enjoyed his humorous antics, admired his interjections, and praised his talent as a comedian. At school, however, interrupting, joking, and distracting class constantly produced negative affects (responses) in me, his teacher. Nevertheless, I kept my feelings in check to try to produce positive affects in Manuel. It took a while for educator and learner (and we both were a little of each) to connect with and conform to each other. Whether it involved small rewards, praise, or making Manuel the main character for a play, affective interactions that were continually revised took place throughout the academic year. As Wetherell observed, “cycles of affective practice might persist for a short period or they may last and be reworked.”<sup>28</sup> Affective practices are interconnecting and can form patterns that will finally produce habits of

mind.<sup>29</sup> The science behind the emotional process in humans is explained by Damasio in the following paragraph:

“Punishment causes organisms to close themselves in, freezing and withdrawing from their surroundings. Reward causes organism to open themselves up and out toward their environment. Approaching it, searching it, and by so doing increasing both their opportunity of survival and their vulnerability.”<sup>30</sup>

Manuel and I recently connected through social media. In a public post, my now adult and former student expressed that he considered me as his favorite teacher. Although not every intervention produces successful re-

sults, I am convinced that in order to teach effectively, there must be an emotional connection—a nurturing work<sup>31</sup>—between educator and learner: “Affect is about sense as well as sensibility. It is practical, communicative, and organized.”<sup>32</sup> More than a century ago, James<sup>33</sup> concluded that educators must motivate and orient students while identifying their aptitudes in order to elevate their self-concept. Self-concept is how people feel about themselves, and it possible for educators to prevent students from feeling personal shame for being themselves.

### Acknowledge the Impact of Affect on Academic Performance

When I began teaching more than 30 years ago, I thought I could change the world. I aspired to move my stu-

dents to feel great about the positive mental and social characteristics they embodied. As Clough et al. put it, I was a body in motion with “more passion for living than you ever experienced.”<sup>34</sup> As a novice teacher, I made many unpopular choices in order to help students I knew were negatively affected. I let my nervous system “react in particular ways upon the contact of particular features of [my classroom] environment.”<sup>35</sup> I mostly walked away from the experience with positive results, although I was not always successful in my attempts to help.

I recall how one student, Diana, began rocking back and forth in a monotonous way during instruction. It was disturbing because her academic experiences were being jeopardized by this behavior. She refused to engage in learning. After unsuccessfully attempting a variety of approaches, finally, one day I held her on my lap—despite the fact that this is frowned on for teachers to do nowadays. This approach helped her relax and feel comfortable narrating heart-wrenching details about her father’s infidelity and subsequent departure from the home.

Diana’s family faced several relational and financial struggles. One such challenge had to do with finding the funds to purchase a dress for her to wear to a school program. I was not able to change her family situation, but I could try to change her sense of self-image and pride. Most of the female students in the classroom were bragging about their new outfits; however, Diana did not have one, which affected her sense of self-worth. Affect theorists point out that interpersonal comparisons can have a significant effect on people’s emotional well-being: “Affect is . . . an energy that can be whipped up or dampened in the course of interaction.”<sup>36</sup>

At the end of a school day, during dismissal, I held an envelope in my hand and asked for donations. This

was done without others knowing that it was to help Diana purchase a new dress. I called Diana’s mother to let her know I would be taking her to purchase a dress, which was bought, miraculously, with the exact amount of money collected. Diana was elated after the experience. The pendulum-like rocking motions ceased, and her academic performance thrived. The problems at home continued, but she knew that she was cared for at school; therefore, her learning im-

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proved. Diana held her chin up high at the school program in her beautiful navy nautical-style dress, and as her teacher, I did, too.

Every student is unique. I do not believe educators should break the rules, as I did at the beginning of my educational practice, to help students’ affects. However, I do believe that every educator should be mindful of the classroom atmosphere. Learner-centered inclusive classrooms are part of the affect turn in education. Accomplishing this requires every educator to engage in daily self-reflection and self-monitoring to stimulate positive affective re-

actions and discern what students are trying to say with or without words in the classroom.<sup>37</sup>

### **Apply a Variety of Strategies and Interventions**

Leys and others<sup>38</sup> posit that emotion and cognition are linked. Troubled emotions, therefore, lead to problems with reasoning and understanding in school. To avoid academic failure for students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), who also exhibit disorderly attitudes because of a history of family, cultural, social, or other kinds of trauma, the most common solution seems to be medication.<sup>39</sup>

When I met Levi, he was an enigmatic, clever, yet impulsive student in one of my 4th-grade classes. However, from the first day, I could tell there was a story behind the rumors of him having ADHD. Rumors about a student’s behavioral issues, according to Anderson, Gregg, and Seigworth<sup>40</sup> can increase anxiety and lead to disillusionment in children, teachers, and school personnel. That is exactly how I perceived Levi’s emotional state: apprehensive and disappointed.

A month into the school year, I learned more about Levi. At this point in his life, he took two prescribed stimulant pills. A third drug tackled his anxiety, irrational thinking, and nightmares. The medication calmed his demeanor in class, and he appeared focused on learning. However, in addition to his emotional state, Levi struggled with his weight and craved unhealthy processed foods.

As a result of the classroom environment, Levi began to believe that he was valued, and soon changes were made to reduce his medication to one pill in the morning on school days. Slowly, as he and his parents learned more about healthful eating, he responded to what he was learning and ate more fruits, vegetables, and legumes as part of his daily diet. Furthermore, I spent quality time with him after school, engaging in home-

work activities and involving him in sports. As part of a structured schedule, he participated in Bible readings and prayer nightly. The results were significant. Not only did Levi's attitude toward life change, but he also made academic improvements, lost weight, and positively affected my life as his teacher.

The turn-to-affect theory comes with an associated risk. The management of medicated bodies is challeng-

ing since parents and educators do not always have the tools to navigate the situation.<sup>41</sup> Fortunately, Levi's doctor was pleased with the results of what less medication, a healthier diet, a structured environment, and more emotional support did for him. As time passed, I too, experienced positive affects as I observed Levi transform into a much healthier, confident, and emotionally balanced child.

## Using Technology to Enhance Affect Turn in Education

Teaching styles are emotionally distinctive and are a significant part of a learner's past experiences. Educators who deliberately modify their teaching styles to accommodate unique students will reap the benefits. Affective practice focuses on emotions as they appear in the lives and actions of learners and helps them to find their voice.<sup>42</sup> "Voice" generally refers to the audible way of communicating but can also be expressed in written form. Using words, educators attempt to understand the feelings students bring into the classroom. But, when students are nonverbal and unable to use pencils or pens to write clearly, it is difficult to understand their emotions and their affects.

Zack was a nonverbal, noncommunicative student whom I was only able to reach by modifying my teaching style. A classroom blog was created to help Zack communicate affectively and effectively. Through his posts, he expressed positive attitudes about science, language arts, and social studies topics. Blackman<sup>43</sup> explained that voices have potential to open up the affect in learners and shape them through personal history.

Some scholars focus on how a positive mood helps to induce thinking that involves greater creativity and flexibility during problem-solving. Proverbs 17:22 says "A merry heart is good medicine" (NIV).<sup>44</sup> Zack was able to master skills such as learning the states and capitals of the United States, rules for capitalization, and the layers of the atmosphere. Not only did he master a variety of skills, but he was also able to reflect on the activities, thereby displaying emotions. "I like the blogging, teacher. It's cool," he wrote in his first post. A connection was made. I interpreted Zack's positive comment as his ultimate desire: "I know desire. I know desire. I too want freedom. I feel its push inside of me, pushing out up my throat, pushing pulsing. I want. Relief."<sup>45</sup> For Zack, the physical-digital combination in the blog expanded his range of knowledge. The technology experience in this affect-supported

## Additional Readings

Affect pedagogies are conceptual but can be adapted to the needs of students in the classroom. There are very few resources that explicitly demonstrate how to use affect theory in the classroom. However, as educational researchers explore the growth of this trend, more will become available. For this reason, it is vital for Adventist educators to be aware of the trend and its philosophical underpinnings and find ways to adapt resources appropriately.

### Books

Thomas Armstrong, *Mindfulness in the Classroom* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [hereafter abbreviated as ASCD], 2019).

Nadia Saderman Hall and Valerie Rhomberg, *The Affective Curriculum: Teaching the Anti-bias Approach to Young Children* (Boston, Mass.: Cengage Learning, 1992).

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### Resource

Affect Academics: <https://www.affectacademics.com/> is a website created by Christina Post, a math and science teacher. Using the Universal Design for Learning curriculum design, she has created an affect-based method for teaching math, reading, and executive skills.

teaching style enabled him to make the abstract concrete.<sup>46</sup> It gave Zack feelings of openness to experience freedom in his academic journey.

### Teachers and the Affect Turn in Education

Reciprocal learning between educator and learner leads to enhanced value and insight for both. The affect turn in education is a two-way transaction that involves, according to Freire, “dreams, utopias, ideas.”<sup>47</sup> Concurring with Picard et al.,<sup>48</sup> numerous studies link interpersonal relationships between educators and learners to productive learning. Effective strategies that support healthy relationships and productive learning include utilizing student profile forms at the beginning of the school term, which provide educators with valuable information about each student. Creating a welcoming environment, affirming diversity, and taking time to make every student feel valuable play important roles in students’ social-emotional development, as well as in their academic achievement.<sup>49</sup>

Teachers who struggle with the affective nature of teaching could benefit from contemplating the example of the teacher par excellence, Jesus Christ, whom “was a close observer, noticing many things that others passed by. He was ever helpful, ever ready to speak words of hope and sympathy to the discouraged and the bereaved.”<sup>50</sup> Jesus showed by example that “the true object of education is to restore the image of God in the soul.”<sup>51</sup> Teachers who focus on observing, noticing, helping, and restoring students understand that in “doing what God wants. . .” (Matthew 6:33, ICB),<sup>52</sup> all the other things (academics, standards and benchmarks, achievement in testing) will be *achieved* by each student.

Educators also benefit from living according to what King Solomon wrote thousands of years ago, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Proverbs 4:23, NIV). Guarding the heart against

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the negative affects in teaching and learning, such as sadness and anger, is important to not only avoid feeling overwhelmed but also to learn how to appropriately handle these emotions. The distressing stories learners bring into the classroom continue to affect the hearts of educators no matter how long they teach, yet experience helps them cope with the pain.

### Conclusion

The personal stories in this article were shared to exemplify how the turn to affect in education is important in order to value the feelings, emotions, and dreams of learners. True education includes taking social and emotional learning into consideration to not only have caring children in and outside of classrooms but also future compassionate adults. Our natural, human tendency toward evil is exemplified in Theodore Kaczynski, and the only antidote for that is God’s character restored in the human heart.

The Adventist philosophy of education states: “Education in its broadest sense is a means of restoring human beings to their original relationship with God.”<sup>53</sup>

The turn to affect does not occur because of more professional development or acquiring the latest teaching gadget. It is a complex interaction between educator and learner on a personal level, and for the Adventist educator, a collaboration with the divine. Affect can modify behaviors, improve academic endeavors, help young people with a wide range of behavioral and emotional issues, and allow students to find their voice in the academic realm. Educators must remember that knowledge must be shared with a critical mind but also with feelings, intuition, emotions, and self-reflection.<sup>54</sup> Then, they will be able to effectively implement the affect turn in education. ✍

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