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Integration of Faith and Learning in Adventist Education: A Brief History and Acknowledged Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the Integration of Faith and Learning has challenged Adventist Education since Ellen White wrote an article about “Proper Education” in the early days of our denominational history (White, 1872). This paper provides a brief history of the contributions made by a number of outstanding and innovative Adventist educators in more recent years. The paper concludes by acknowledging and outlining some of the challenges that still remain, along with some questions to elicit further discussion and possible research.

Introduction

The Integration of Faith and Learning (IFL) has been defined as follows: “The integration of faith and values with teaching and learning is a deliberate and systematic process of approaching the entire educational enterprise—both curricular and co-curricular—from a biblical perspective” (Rasi, 2013, para. 1). This topic has exercised Adventist teachers and researchers for many years. Commencing in the 1940s, George Akers, followed by a number of prominent Adventist educators and researchers, contributed to the current definition and understanding of IFL in Adventist classrooms. The next section of this paper outlines a brief history of the contributions made by these individuals as ascertained by researching Adventist archival resources.

History

The concept of Integration of Faith and Learning (IFL) has a long history in Adventist education, dating back to at least 1872, with the publication by Ellen White of an article entitled: “Proper Education” (White, 1872). In this article White introduced a theme that would become the basis of what we now refer to as ‘IFL’, i.e., that true education should consist of a combination of “Moral, intellectual and physical cultures ... in order to have well-developed, well-balanced men and women” (p. 157). In developing this theme, she later wrote that true education “is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come” (White, 1903, p. 13).

July 1897 saw the publication of a monthly journal entitled: “*The Christian Educator: The Thorough, Systematic, and Symmetrical Culture of the Hand, Head, and Heart in the Home, School, and Church.*” The lead article of the first issue, entitled “Teachers and Teaching” (White, 1987), with its emphasis on the Bible as the basis of all true education, set the tone for this and subsequent journals of education published by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Other early examples of

articles with an IFL focus include: “Science and the Bible” (Cady, 1909); “Geography and Missions” (Foster-Rathburn, 1909); “The Bible Deserves to be Studied” (Griggs, 1909); and “Higher English and the Bible” (Olsen, 1909). Currently, *The Journal of Adventist Education* continues to promote IFL with articles such as “The Prayer Project: Prayer as Theory and Practice in a Literature Class” (Hyman, 2023, pp. 33-35).

“In recent decades, the IFL concept, and its application, have prompted research, dialogue, and deliberation amongst Adventist academics, researchers, and educators” Fisher (2021, p. 11). The following list provides a small sample of the contributors, both historically and currently, involved in promoting and researching IFL in Adventist schools. They include: Akers & Moon (1980a); Currow & Hattingh (2020); Kilgour (2021); Korniejczuk & Kijai, (1994); Nwosu (1999); Petrie et al. (2019a); Petrie et al. (2019b); Prior (2021); Rasi (2013); Roy (2001); Taylor (2012); and Trye (2017). During these same decades, non-Adventist scholars have also suggested that “the integration of faith and learning is what makes Christian education unique and decidedly different from secular education” (Fisher, 2021, p. 11). For example: Chadwick (1982); Fyson (2019); Gaebelein (1968); Hegland (1954); Heie & Wolfe (1987); and Holmes (1987).

Interestingly, at the beginning of the 20th Century, White (1903) contended that the work of “education and redemption are one” (p. 30) and that “The students in our schools and all our youth should be given an education that will strengthen them in the faith” (White, 1905, para. 2). According to Knight (2021), White also “explicitly affirmed that the Bible must be at the center” of all Adventist education, “and that Adventist schools should not follow the false leads of classical education” (p. 8). “From these statements, Seventh-day Adventist education, it would appear, was provided with a head start regarding understanding the concept of IFL and its importance in Adventist schools” (Fisher, 2021, p. 11).

As stated above, a number of Adventist educators/researchers have contributed to the growing Adventist understanding of the purpose and practice of IFL in the classroom. The inputs of a number of the most prominent of these will be highlighted below, commencing with George Akers.

George Akers (1926–2017)

In 1980, Akers and Moon (1980a, 1980b) published a seminal two-part article for a continuing education study program delineating their thoughts and concepts regarding IFL, Adventist education, and educators. The stated aim of the authors for this two-part article was to provide Adventist teachers with a better understanding of “the meaning of, need for, and process of integrating learning, faith, and practice in every aspect of Christian education” (Akers & Moon, 1980a, p. 17). An important aspect of this two-part article was that it provided an IFL checklist for teachers as they developed and expanded their understanding of IFL practices.

At this time, Akers was the first Dean of the School of Education at Andrews University, and Moon was the Director of Institutional Research and Coordinator for Curriculum, Instruction, and Supervision at Andrews University. During the next few years (1980-1985), while continuing to carry a heavy load of teaching and administrative duties in the new School of Education, Akers travelled the world speaking “on the topics he was passionate about [in] Christian education; that is, the role of the teacher in school and character development, and the proper integration of faith and learning” (du Preez, 2020, para. 18). In addition, he published several articles discussing the importance of the integration of faith and learning (du Preez, 2020, para. 18).

Akers was given an even greater opportunity to promote the concept of IFL in Adventist classrooms worldwide during the time he served as the Director of the Education Department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in the years 1985-1990 (du Preez, 2020, para 19). During

these years, he travelled the world extensively, encouraging “Christian teachers... to emphasize the imperativeness of a truly balanced Christian education” (du Preez, 2020, para. 19). During this time also, he “recorded a six-part series of video-taped lectures for use in teacher education at Adventist colleges and universities” (du Preez, 2020, para. 19), thus extending the impact of his lifework. After his retirement from the role of Education Director in 1990, Akers returned to Andrews University, where he spent the next eight years teaching, writing, and mentoring future students so that, indeed, it can be said that “his legacy is hundreds of Adventist leaders who have sat at his feet and caught his vision of Christ-centered Adventist schools sharing Jesus with tens of thousands of students every year” (Blackmer, cited in Kellner, 2017, para 9). Humberto Rasi, who served as Associate Director of the Education Department at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (1987-1990) and then succeeded Akers as Director (1990-2002), remembered Akers as “an eloquent expositor of the foundational concepts of Adventist education and a trusted mentor to two generations of teachers and leaders” (Kellner, 2017, para. 10).

Humberto Rasi (1935–2023)

Humberto Rasi collaborated with George Akers in establishing the Institute for Christian Teaching (Humberto Rasi remembers working with Akers (Kellner, 2017, para 10) as together they developed the “Institute for Christian Teaching” in 1987. For the next 21 years (1988-2009), a total of 40 “Faith and Learning Seminars” were conducted in Adventist educational institutions worldwide resultant in hundreds of essays being written and published in “40 volumes of the Christ in the Classroom series” (Institute for Christian Teaching, 1988-2016, Welcome Section, para. 1). Countries visited during 1988-2009 included: The United States, Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, England, France, Germany, Ghana, India, Kenya, Korea, Jamaica, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and South Africa (Institute for Christian Teaching, 1988-2016, About Us Section, para. 3).

These seminars, conducted “under the auspices of the Institute for Christian Teaching” (1988-2016, Welcome Section, para 1), “required participating” Adventist “teachers to research and present papers promoting IFL in their academic discipline and its application in the” Adventist “school setting.” During each of these seminars, Rasi mentored participants in writing up their research findings and edited their papers in preparation for publication. Eventually, more than 1,400 of these papers were published in the 40-volume “Christ in the Classroom” series, which can be accessed on the Institute for Christian Teaching (1988-2016) website.

George Knight

George Knight, currently emeritus professor of church history at Andrews University, is a leading Adventist, historian, author, and educator. In recent years, George Knight’s publications *Philosophy and Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective* (1998) and *Educating for Eternity: A Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education* (2016) have contributed to the discussion concerning a unique Adventist IFL perspective.

John Wesley Taylor V

John Wesley Taylor V, Associate Director of Education at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists from 2010 to 2023, and currently the President of Andrews University, is another academic who has contributed a variety of articles on the topic of IFL. His 2012 article, published in *The Journal of Adventist Education*, outlined “*A Biblical Foundation for the Integration of Faith and Learning*” (Taylor, 2012). Other instructional IFL articles by Taylor are available in several volumes of the *Christ in the Classroom* publication- six in English and two in Spanish.

Adventor M. Trye, Jr

Trye's (2017) recent research has proposed an "operational definition of IFL" (para. 1) that utilises an "innovation configuration map" involving "10 components" considered to be essential for "implementing IFL from an Adventist worldview" (para. 1) perspective. Further elaboration of Trye's "innovation configuration map for integrating faith in learning" can be found in Trye, Heinrequez-Green, and Green (2019, p. 1).

Current Directions on IFL

In 2023, an IFL textbook entitled *The Handbook of Integration of Faith and Learning* is being compiled by editors Safary Wa-Mbaleka, Prema Gaikwad, and Shawna Vyhmeister, who are coordinating chapter contributions solicited from the worldwide Adventist educational community. The editors have stated that this comprehensive textbook aims to bring IFL literature from around the world together into one volume (Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe, North America, Central America, and South America). It will outline and discuss the topic of IFL, its ramifications, and its application in Adventist education across the globe (The Journal of Adventist Education Staff, 2023, para. 4).

As stated in an article by The Journal of Adventist Education Staff (2023, para. 4) commemorating the passing of Humberto Rasi in July 2023, this "forthcoming publication sponsored by the General Conference Education Department, will be dedicated to Dr. Rasi".

Acknowledged Challenges

"According to Nwosu (1999), Burton and Nwosu (2003), and Beardsley (2009), the application and acceptance of IFL appear to be quite varied across the worldwide SDA school system." (Fisher 2012, p. 11). Some challenges to the implementation of IFL in the Adventist classroom include the following:

1. The philosophy of IFL, it would appear, is generally understood and accepted by Adventist teachers; however, the practice and implementation of IFL within the classroom seems to be less understood and may present a daunting challenge to some Adventist teachers.
2. According to Korniejczuk and Kijai (1994), it can be hard to get the balance right, as "Some [teachers] emphasize faith and diminish learning; others accentuate learning and relegate faith to an isolated corner of the curriculum" (p. 79).
3. Fisher (2021) pointed out the debate over which IFL practice is best in the Adventist classroom - 'incidental' or 'intentional.' Intentional IFL is regarded as being contrived, while incidental IFL, in contrast, is regarded as being more natural and spontaneous.
4. Conflicting worldviews, evidenced in government curriculum, can be problematic in Adventist classrooms.
5. A current IFL challenge for Adventist institutions involves a diminishing number of available Adventist teachers for specific teaching specialties. Consequently, an increasing number of teachers from a variety of worldviews, faith backgrounds, or no faith at all are required to fill these teaching positions.
6. A developing IFL challenge involves the increasing number of parents of students from other faiths or no faith at all becoming involved in parent and school meeting management positions and the unwittingly potential for the development of Saturday recreational clubs and competitions.

Some typical questions and concerns Adventist teachers raise about IFL and its practice include:

1. How can I start to be intentional about IFL in my classroom?

2. I teach a Bible lesson each day, so isn't that including IFL in my classroom?
3. Is IFL worth all the extra effort, as I am a very busy teacher?
4. If I use a Bible text and have a prayer each lesson, isn't that IFL in my classroom?
5. These IFL lessons are really Bible lessons because they don't teach the stipulated curriculum content.

In wrestling with these issues, it would be well to keep in mind the following advice from Akers (1993). Effective IFL, he states, is “more than laminating a religious perspective onto traditional secular subject matter” (p. 8). Further, Taylor (2000) reminds Adventist teachers that effective IFL requires “a foundational understanding of Christian education, a personal commitment to think and teach Christianly, and concentrated effort to move forward, by the grace of God” (p. 423). Finally, in making decisions on how to implement IFL practices in the classroom, teachers can be informed by the admonition from Colossians 2:8 (NIV, 1973/2011): “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.”

Conclusion

This paper has provided a brief history of the major contributors to the current understanding of IFL in the Adventist Education System. It also raises some of the challenges Adventist teachers face in the implementation of IFL in their classrooms. As a catalyst for further discussion and research, we have included relevant questions that we have constantly encountered in our professional experience as educators. We have found that there are many papers available to assist teachers in finding answers to these questions that are applicable in a variety of subject areas and situations. (For example, see the *Christ in the Classroom* series, edited by Dr Rasi - <http://christintheclassroom.org>).

It is the hope and prayer of the authors that teachers and teacher educators will be encouraged to work through any challenges to IFL in their school systems so that they, too, will become part of the long history of Adventist teachers who have successfully used IFL in their classrooms to help students internalise and live out their Christian faith.

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