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Meeting Students Where They Are



Lionel Matthews



Elvin Gabriel

Consciously or unconsciously, teachers choose discipline/management strategies based on assumptions about human nature and the goals of education, as well as the teaching methodology that they believe will produce the desired results.

McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y management model¹ illustrates the tendency of theorists to dichotomize human nature. When applied to the teacher/student classroom interaction, this model forces teachers into one of two groups. Those who embrace Theory X see students as naturally opposed to learning and to the rules governing classroom deportment, behaving appropriately only when coerced to do so. Teachers with a Theory Y orientation, by contrast, assume that children are naturally eager to learn, and will willingly comply with classroom rules, once the right conditions are present.

Thus, the Theory X and Theory Y approach sorts students into mutually exclusive categories—those who are amenable to learning, and those who are not. A more fruitful approach is the less-prescriptive Contingency Management Model,² which recommends that teachers choose a classroom-management strategy based on the unique characteristics of each teaching/learning situation. This requires teachers to constantly consider such factors as students' age, maturity, gender, ethnicity, and other variables, together with the social/cultural community context in order to craft an appropriate discipline/management strategy for their classrooms.

Once the classroom discipline/management plan is in place, teachers must weigh the impact of current and past circumstances on the behavior of their students to decide on the type and severity of the sanctions to employ. A one-size-fits-all policy seldom, if ever, works well because it separates the content and context of students' behavior and often results in unfair penalties. This may

cause students to rebel or become apathetic. The Christian teacher must ever guard against either outcome.

Admittedly, applying the Contingency Management Model to the classroom situation can be a challenge, but this approach not only sensitizes teachers to the forces that help shape students' behaviors, but also helps to ensure that teachers deal fairly with such behaviors. Further, this approach is consistent with the method of the Master Teacher who "met the people where they were,"³ in order to fulfill their specific and diverse needs. By following Christ's example, Adventist teachers can feel confident of achieving the ultimate redemptive goal of teaching: that their students are nurtured and developed in a wholistic way in preparation for productive lives here and in the hereafter.

The authors of this guest editorial served as coordinators for this special issue on classroom management and discipline: Lionel Matthews, Ph.D., is a Professor of Sociology in the Department of Behavioral Science at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and Elvin Gabriel, Ed.D., is Professor of Educational Psychology and Counselor Education at Andrews University. The JAE editorial staff express heartfelt appreciation for the many hours Drs. Matthews and Gabriel devoted to selecting topics, obtaining peer reviewers, providing input on article content, as well as their prompt response to the editor's questions during the planning and production of the issue.

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