

Institute for Christian Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventist

**THE SPECIAL CHARACTER IN THE TOTAL OPERATIONS
OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST PRIMARY SCHOOLS:
A NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT**

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The term “Faith and Learning” is often referred to in the context of classroom interactions. This essay will look at how New Zealand Seventh-day Adventist schools attempt to bring faith and learning via their special character into all areas of the school’s operation, not just the classroom. It will also highlight some of the challenges being faced currently.

In the early 1990s the New Zealand Seventh-day Adventist education system was facing closure due mainly to escalating school fees brought about by rising employment costs and increased costs of operating. In 1993 it integrated as a system with the New Zealand Government and became an Integrated State School System of Special Character.

If one were to interview a group of four or five teachers of a small Adventist primary school in the lower North Island of New Zealand prior to 1993, as to whether they ran a good Seventh-day Adventist school, their answer would be an emphatic “Yes!” Asked why or how this happened and their answers would typically be something like this.

“This school commenced as a Seventh-day Adventist school in 1903. The two acre block of land was donated by an old sister of the church who could see the huge potential for Christian education in a growing rural town. The materials to build the school were donated by the families of the church. The school was built by the members of the church who all donated their time freely. The school has always had committed Adventist teachers who were teaching whole classes of Adventist children. The Adventist church next door has willingly supported the school financially until

1993 when the burden nearly became too much to sustain. So of course we are a good Seventh-day Adventist school!”

Unless seriously challenged on a regular basis many Adventist schools default to operating in a mediocre zone of comfort with staff believing they are running an excellent school but unable to articulate what this is based on or what it means.

Little did this small group of teachers know that they and the teachers in the other fifteen Adventist schools throughout New Zealand would be seriously challenged as a result of Integration with the State in 1993. They were, in reality, offering a Christian education that was a “...only a good secular education with ecclesiastical window dressing ...” Akers and Moon, (1988, p.7)

In the early 1990s the Adventist church commenced negotiations with the New Zealand Government to become an Integrated State school System of Special Character. This would mean that Adventist schools would have their total financial operation taken over by the State. This included teachers and staff salaries, resource funding, professional development costs, repairs and maintenance and capital expansion. It meant a 75% reduction in school fees and a potential growth in school enrolments.

There was a requirement however. Each school had to demonstrate clearly its special character, and should the Education Review Office (ERO) conclude through their audits that this was not being achieved then the Integration agreement could be cancelled and the school deregistered.

ERO was established by the Government to audit the operations of all State and Integrated Private schools. A team of up to four persons visits each school for up to three days, auditing governance by the school board, management by the principal and the quality of teaching by the staff. These visits are scheduled once every three years, though more frequently should a school receive a poor review. As the school is funded by Government taxes, these ERO reports are freely available to the public through the media and frequently end up as front page news of local papers.

In the case of Seventh-day Adventist schools the special character is defined as "...the faith system made up of Christian beliefs, values and lifestyles of the Seventh-day Adventist church."

Each local School Board of Trustees (BoT) is responsible for the governance of its school. The membership is made up of eleven members. Five are parent representatives and are nominated and voted upon by the school's parent body. Four are appointed by the local Conference to represent the interests of the Seventh-day Adventist church. The staff elects one representative and the principal is *ex-officio*. At the first meeting of the BoT the chairman, secretary and treasurer are voted in. The BoT then operates for a period of three years.

The BoT is tasked with maintaining the special character of the school as well as carrying out the mandates of the National Administrative Guidelines. (NAGs) It does this mostly by the establishment of small committees under each NAG made up of one or two BoT members and two or three willing parents who will usually have

expertise in the area the committee is working in. These committees meet on a regular basis and file regular reports back to the BoT at its meetings.

In order to assist the BoT to maintain the school's special character the Conference Education Department developed a simple instrument to document the school's level of achievement in this area. The instrument surveys the areas of special character and:-

The school board of trustees operation

The principal

The teachers

The students

The curriculum

Employment procedures

Property

These reports are filed with the BoT and a copy is sent to the Education Director for follow up action as required.

The initial ERO reports produced much righteousness indignation and discouragement amongst the Adventist schools. In the area of special character ERO determined that our schools were doing poorly, with a number of schools no different than a good State school in the locality. What became clear was that Adventist teachers and parents were taking Adventist special character for granted. It was not being well defined, articulated, displayed or incorporated into the fabric of the school's operation. And while the picture may not have been quite as bad as Professor Gordon Clark's Christian college where "The program was merely a pagan

education with a chocolate covering of Christianity” Gaebelein, (1968, p17), it needs to be accepted that State secular reviewers could detect little evidence of Adventist education taking place.

The challenge then was to make Seventh-day Adventist education integral and highly evident throughout the total operation of the school. Akers and Moon (1980) reflects that “The single most important concern of Christian schools should be the integration of learning, faith, and practice in every aspect of the curriculum.” (p. 1)

Often Adventist school principals and Education Directors interpret “... in every aspect of the curriculum.” as referring to the academic programme only. But it has to do with more than just this narrow interpretation. “Every aspect” has to do with encompassing the total campus – from the front gate to the back fence – and all that transpires to make the school successfully Seventh-day Adventist.

1984 is a significant milestone in the history of New Zealand education. With the election of a Labour Government, New Zealand schools underwent considerable reform labelled “Tomorrow’s Schools.” After considerable consultation with educational institutions and the community, major transformation of the syllabus took place along with major changes in the governance model. School governance moved away from a highly centralised bureaucratic process to governance by individual school Boards of Trustees reflecting the culture and needs of the communities they were elected by.

In the curriculum areas New Zealand schools were required by the State to conform to six National Administration Guidelines (NAGs). Schools are required to apply these guideline statements to the context of their school's culture and thus create a school's unique special character or culture. These statements become the basis of the ERO reviews.

The NAGs set the parameters for the school's operation. Broadly they cover the areas of:-

- NAG 1 Curriculum delivery and student achievement.
- NAG 2 Strategic planning, self review and reporting.
- NAG 3 Personnel management and employment.
- NAG 4 Finance and property
- NAG 5 Health and safety.
- NAG 6 General legislation.

This list is somewhat shorter than the General Conference Adventist Accrediting Association criterion. The eleven criteria make a close fit with the six NAGs. Unfortunately, unlike the NAGs they do not carry any binding legal obligation. Responses or reactions to an accreditation report still largely depend on the good will of the board, principal and staff.

NAG 1 would include programs of study and spiritual development, service and witnessing, academic policies and records

NAG 2 would include history, philosophy, mission and objectives, as well as governance, organisation and administration.

NAG 3 would include faculty and staff, student services,

NAG 4 would include finances, financial structure and industries, library and resource centres, physical plant and facilities

NAG 5 has no equivalent

NAG 6 would include public relations and external constituencies

Many Adventist schools focus on delivering faith and learning in the context of classroom interactions. But I wish to turn the theme of this conference into a question and ask “How do we convey Biblical beliefs and Christian values through Adventist education, using the six NAGs as listed above?” Or, to use the words of an ERO officer in the early days following integration, “I am asking how is your school different to a good government school down the road, and how will you document, show, and articulate this to others?”

The first NAG states that:

“Each Board of trustees is required to foster student achievement by providing teaching and learning programmes which incorporate the New Zealand Curriculum (Essential learning areas, essential skills and attitudes and values) as expressed in the National Curriculum Statements.”

www.minedu.govt.nz (19 Feb 08, 1630)

To implement any of the NAGs the New Zealand Adventist schools first develop policies. Initially the policies were little different to any policy of a good State school. In fact in some instances they had been borrowed word for word from the State school next door! Now it is appreciated keenly that this is where the special character begins. Examples of rationales from some curriculum policies include:

Curriculum Delivery

“God acts with purpose and meaning. He acts and works with purpose and forethought seeking to effectively accomplish His intended purpose. In emulating this South Auckland Seventh-day Adventist School has developed a clear outline of its intention for Curriculum delivery in the school. In so doing there is an attempt to provide a structure that meets the school’s obligations while providing a broad and balanced learning programme that achieves both national and local goals.

As a school that upholds the Seventh-day Adventist Special Character as its purpose for existence, the South Auckland Seventh-day Adventist School will ensure that it’s Special Character is entrenched in its curriculum documentation to assist in its teaching.”

South Auckland SDA School Curriculum Documentation, Curriculum Delivery Policy.

This rationale statement links the way the school intends to deliver its curriculum with the way God operates. The curriculum is delivered with God like purpose thus creating a link between special character and state legislation.

Another example comes from the policy on Teacher Planning and Preparation. Note the connection with an attribute of God and the link to learning process.

Teacher Planning and Preparation

“God is a being of order; design and purpose who created infinite variation in humanity. Teachers have accepted the responsibility of being models of God and the need for purposeful design and order in the leaning process and all aspects of life. To run classrooms that are effective, teachers will plan and prepare written programmes of work that are closely linked to the Seventh-day Adventist and New Zealand curriculum statements and school curriculum

documentation. Planning should reflect an endeavour to meet the unique individual needs of the child by developing and extending their strengths and removing or minimising barriers.”

South Auckland SDA School Curriculum documentation, Curriculum Policy.

Any teacher can plan a term’s work covering all subjects of the curriculum. But the Adventist teacher is ensuring that Faith and Learning will take place by providing the appropriate God Is Like This statements as well. God Is Like This statements is a document produced a number of years ago to assist in maintaining Adventist schools ethos – special character. This is further developed in the Science policy rationale that follows.

Science

“God is the GREAT Creator. He is the author of the universe, the originator of it’s laws and the keeper and protector of all He has made. In creating this earth for humanity God designed that humanity would assume responsibility for the care and nurture of the planet with God himself revealing its secrets. Science provides and promotes experiences which enable students to learn more about God the creator and the world He has made for them to live in and care for. It encourages the development of spiritual, aesthetic and environmental awareness as well as providing faith application opportunities. Science develops logical and creative thinking, reasoning and problem solving skills and encourages life-long interest in their biological, physical and technological environments.

South Auckland Curriculum Documentation, Science Policy

Prior to Integration there was not the focus or need to articulate clearly how Biblical beliefs and Christian values would be conveyed through Adventist education.

The teachers themselves need to be totally committed to Christ and the task at hand. Gaberlein (1968) again says “Yes, the crux of the problem lies with the teacher. The fact is inescapable; the world view of the teacher, in so far as he is effective, gradually conditions the world view of the pupil. ...In one way or another every teacher expresses the convictions he lives by, whether they be spiritually positive or negative.” (p. 37)

To this end the local Conference holds an annual long weekend conference for all teachers of the system on some aspect of special character. The conference often has an international guest speaker. These annual conferences are appreciated and effective in maintaining teacher morale as well as keeping the special character to the forefront of the profession.

The National Curriculum Statements are taken and separate documents created to integrate the special character into the teaching and learning process. The Government expects and demands that these documents be present to ensure the Integration Agreement is being upheld.

It is relatively easy to ensure that the special character statements are appropriate and present in each document. The challenge is to have Adventist teachers who can articulate in fresh and engaging ways the Adventist world view. New Zealand teachers generally, whether State or Church, have a culture of not being slavishly attached to text books, but rather to use a variety of resources to meet their teaching needs. Consequently the challenge is to ensure that the teachers have the necessary skills to use these resources in ways that support the Adventist world view.

The second NAG has to do with Strategic Planning, Self Review and Reporting.

“Each Board of Trustees, with the principal and teaching staff, is required to:

- i) develop a strategic plan which documents how they are giving effect to the National Education Guidelines through their policies, plans and programmes, including those for curriculum, assessment and staff professional development;
- ii) maintain an on-going programme of self-review in relation to the above policies, plans and programmes, including evaluation of information on student achievement;
- iii) report to students and their parents on the achievement of individual students, and to the school's community on the achievement of students as a whole and of groups (identified through 1(iii) above) including the achievement of Maori students against the plans and targets referred to above. www.minedu.govt.nz (19 Feb 08, 1630)

The South Auckland SDA School provides an example of their Strategic Planning policy. Once again the policy rationales reflect the special character input for this NAG.

Rationale

“God expects us as a school community, to be the very best we can possibly be. In order for the school to ensure ongoing improvement & development, it is vital to systematically review all areas of school operation, and in conjunction with this – to plan ahead in order to take the school to where it needs to be in the future. A vital link in this process is the reporting to and consulting with the school's community.”

South Auckland SDA School Curriculum Documentation, Strategic Planning Policy

In this area strategic plans include ongoing plans for evangelism and the spiritual plans for the school. An outcome for many schools has been the development of a “Faith Development” document that outlines how the school will move each child to a knowledge and acceptance of Christ and make them his disciples. This includes more than just the Bible program. It covers areas of Chaplaincy, school assemblies, Weeks of Prayer, community outreach such as health programs, cooking demonstrations, smoking cessation programs along with plans for supporting the local church in its outreach programs as well.

The self reviews undertaken measure the spiritual impact of the school in its community and seek ways to be more effective in all that it does. This self review is not done with just the Adventist children and families in the school but includes the non-Adventists as well, in some cases as high as 95% of the school enrolments.

A question exists as to whether a school with a high non-Adventist enrolment, when carrying out its mandated consultation with the community can be forced to relinquish the standard of its special character. Such a situation could arise in most New Zealand Adventist schools. Fortunately the answer is no. The school is required by national law to maintain its special character. Where the feedback from the community does not uphold the “...the faith system made up of Christian beliefs, values and lifestyles of the Seventh-day Adventist church.” The school is not obliged to accept the findings of the consultation.

NAG 3 deals with Employer Responsibilities and Personnel Management. It states that:-

According to the legislation on employment and personnel matters, each Board of Trustees is required in particular to:

develop and implement personnel and industrial policies, within policy and procedural frameworks set by the Government from time to time, which promote high levels of staff performance, use educational resources effectively and recognise the needs of students;

be a good employer as defined in the State Sector Act 1988 and comply with the conditions contained in employment contracts applying to teaching and non-teaching staff.

www.minedu.govt.nz (19 Feb 08, 1630)

The Personnel Management policy from the Hamilton SDA School clearly shows the links between a special character requirement and that of Government mandated requirements.

“The life of Jesus clearly portrays God’s love for all people and shows the value he places on each individual. The attitudes and actions of the Hamilton Seventh-day Adventist School must demonstrate a commitment to following the example of Jesus as well as meeting the legislative and regulatory requirements on employment and personnel matters in accordance with National Administration Guideline 3.” Hamilton SDA School Curriculum Documentation, Personnel Management Policy.

All New Zealand schools are required to have performance management programmes in place. The Hamilton SDA School provides another example of linking special character and Government mandates together.

“God expects us each to develop to our full potential. Performance Management forms an important part of this process by providing an ongoing “cycle” that will assist in teacher development and accountability.” Hamilton SDA School Curriculum Documentation,

Performance Management Policy.

For New Zealand Adventist schools NAG 3 does not just represent finding a person for the job and making sure that person's professional development needs are met as a matter of being a good employer. There is the realisation also that each person is a child of God; that there is a fair and proper way for a Christian institution to conduct its selection process. There is also the need to carefully select the appropriate individual to ensure that he/she will have a consistently positive special character influence on the children. The tension exists of course to ensure that a Seventh-day Adventist person is chosen for each position. Many times Boards will state that they have a better academically qualified candidate for a position who is a Christian none the less, so therefore they should be chosen, a course of action that Gaebelein (1968) refers to as a "surrender to expediency." (p38). These Boards forget the role they have of professional support and development for all staff members. The Conference Education Director has the power to veto any appointment not considered suitable for a school based on special character considerations.

New Zealand legislation now requires that all full time positions for Adventist schools must be filled by Adventist members in good and regular standing, once again demonstrating how faith and learning impacts in more areas than just within the walls of the classroom setting.

As reflected in other areas around the world New Zealand Adventist schools struggle to find suitable Adventist teachers to fill all teaching vacancies. For example, currently one small primary school of forty children has been unable to fill the

principal's position with an Adventist principal. The acting principal is a Christian of another faith.

Another challenge has been to manage contract teachers in a caring way. These teachers are non-Adventist teachers who are filling a vacancy due to no suitable Adventist being found. Their positions must be re-advertised each year and they need to re-apply. Failure to re-advertise within twelve months, and the current person is then considered to have a permanent placement. At present high schools find this a greater challenge than the primaries.

The second part of the NAG emphasises the need for professional development. Adventist schools contextualise this as seeing each person not only as a child of God, but as having potential and an infinite plan written by God for each person. Psalms 139.16. They ensure that regular provision is given to staff as a whole to attend regular spiritual retreats often organised by the Conference to grow and support the teachers in their individual faith walks.

NAG 4 deals with the Financial and Property Management area of the school. It states that:

“...according to legislation on financial and property matters, each Board of Trustees is also required in particular to:

allocate funds to reflect the school's priorities as stated in the charter;

monitor and control school expenditure, and ensure that annual accounts are prepared and audited as required by the Public Finance Act 1989 and the Education Act 1989;

comply with the negotiated conditions of any current asset management agreement, and implement a maintenance programme to ensure that the school's buildings and facilities provide a safe, healthy learning environment for students. www.minedu.govt.nz (19 Feb 08, 1630)

The Hamilton SDA School policy rationale indicates that

“God expects us to use our resources wisely. It is expected that the school will have financial procedures in place in order to provide adequately for present and future needs. Hamilton SDA School Financial and Property Management documentation.

Operating this NAG within the special character constraints of Adventist schools, requires schools to view their role as stewards of the physical plant of the school. In “Campus Beautification: A Factor in Integration of Faith and Learning.” Boughman outlines a principle of stewardship which addresses campus beautification through layout and design. The principle espoused can be equally applied to all areas of school property including buildings, furnishings and equipment. “As Christians, we have a God given mandate to care for the earth....God did not give this dominion so humanity could plunder the earth’s resources. Rather, He intended that humans be stewards, to keep and protect the earth.” Boughman, (1994, p8)

Schools ensure that sufficient financial provision is given for the support of teaching particularly in the special character areas. Nor is their focus just on the financial area, but as the NAG directs the property as well. Many of the New Zealand Adventist schools have spent considerable time and effort in displaying clearly to their communities by way of signage and foyer displays what the school stands for and

promotes spiritually. These tasteful displays have led to many discussions and studies on Adventism with many visitors and parents alike.

NAG 5 has to do with Health and Safety.

“Each Board of Trustees is also required to:

- a) provide a safe physical and emotional environment for students;
- b) comply in full with any legislation currently in force or that may be developed to ensure the safety of students and employees. www.minedu.govt.nz (19 Feb 08, 1630)

Rationales from school policies stress God’s desire that we all be in good health 3 John 1:2. Further that there is a responsibility to provide care for each child on the basis that each is a unique creation by God, and that He expects children to be in the kingdom. Matthew 19:14. Often on the other hand safety is promoted in school settings more out of a fear of litigation and failure to comply rather than the more positive view based on the school’s overarching philosophical base.

This NAG impacts the behaviour management policy as well. From one school the following rationale reads

“One of the central tasks of the Hamilton Seventh-day Adventist Primary School is to develop Christlike behaviour that is displayed in all situations. This is viewed as a developmental partnership between school, home and community. Self control and Christian Discipleship is to be the ultimate objective of all discipleship.” Hamilton SDA School NAG 5 documentation, Behaviour Management Policy

The NAG also allows the Adventist schools to express their anti-smoking policy in terms of our bodies being the temple of the Holy Spirit. 1 Cor 6:19, as well as establishing healthful standards for food and drinks served in the canteen.

NAG 6 addresses the school and its legal requirements through General Legislation.

“Each Board of Trustees is also expected to comply with all general legislation concerning requirements such as attendance, the length of the school day, and the length of the school year.”

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Once again the schools approach this NAG from a Biblical perspective. Based on Romans 13:1-3 there is a Christian duty to submit to the authorities. The special character philosophy encourages the school to comply with particular legislation not out of a duty to fulfil but a desire to please God, and where possible to go the second mile. Matthew 5:41.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, mention was made of the poor audit reports received by the schools immediately after integration. Since then the New Zealand Seventh-day Adventist schools have made significant progress in developing the quality of their faith and learning in all areas of the school's operation.

While faith and learning are primarily transmitted through the lives of teachers interacting with students, this too can be just an add on, if the rest of the school's operation is not constructed and embedded within a special character dynamic. The schooling enterprise is not just centred on student teacher interaction. It has to do with the whole school enterprise and all of the interactions it has with its community, be that commercial, legal, business, departmental or whatever. Each contact with the school, by whoever, should be one that gives opportunity for the school to witness its Seventh-day Adventist special character and thus move faith and learning beyond the classroom.

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