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Authoritative Education: The Recommended Practice for Educators

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AUTHORITATIVE EDUCATION

The Recommended Practice for Educators

Seventh-day Adventist educators believe 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."[1] This is more than an aspirational aim. For this to occur, educators must be intentional in making decisions that will help cultivate an environment where growth takes place. The goal of this article is to inspire Christian teachers and administrators to view an authoritative style as the recommended practice in the complex process of educating and advising students to achieve the goals of true education.

The person best known for introducing the authoritative concept is Diana Baumrind.[2] A clinical and developmental psychologist, she pro-posed that parenting is structured around one or a combination of authoritarian, permissive, or authoritative parenting styles.[3] According to Baumrind, *authoritarian parents* are highly directive and highly demanding, but also provide limited support or responsiveness to the needs of their children. These parents demand absolute obedience and inflict harsh punishments. By contrast, *permissive parents* offer warmth and acceptance but provide limited levels of structure. These parents provide neither firm boundaries nor definitive behavioral controls.[4]

Baumrind described a third category: *authoritative parents*, as those who love and respect their children while identifying boundaries, maintaining demands, and seeking obedience.[5] A large body of research reveals that children raised by authoritative parents become independent and self-reliant, develop good social skills, exhibit emotional regulation and self-control, and explore new environments without fear. Based on decades of research, child-development experts have concluded that authoritative parenting produces the best outcomes in children.[6]

There are strong arguments for applying the tenets of the authoritative parenting style to the teacher-student relationship in the classroom.[7] There is an undeniable nexus that exists between the home and school. Home and school can be considered components of a singular institution because they fulfill a singular purpose. The book *Education* by Ellen G. White sums it up as follows: "It is in the early years in the home and in the formal schoolwork that the mind develops, a pattern of living is established, and character is formed."[8] The cooperative nature of the home, represented by parents—and the school,

represented by teachers and educational administrators— is adroitly expressed in this way: "God has given to parents and teachers the work of educating the children and youth in these lines, and from every act of their lives they may be taught spiritual lessons."[9]

There are examples in the Bible that illustrate the effects of Baumrind's theory. For example, Aaron favored a permissive style when educating his two oldest sons. As a result, both Nadab and Abihu perished in front of the altar when, in their first performance as priests, they offered profane fire that was never ordained by God (Leviticus 10:1, 2).

Jephthah demonstrated an authoritarian style when he promised God, "'whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return . . . I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering'" (Judges 11:31).[10] To Jephthah's surprise, the person who received him was his only daughter. Because of his authoritarian style, Jephthah's daughter lost her life (Judges 11:39), and he later commenced a civil war with the tribe of Ephraim in which 42,000 men were killed without mercy (Judges 11:1-7). Abraham, on the other hand, exemplified an authoritative style. As recorded in Genesis 22, when God asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham did not force the young man to lay on the altar, he simply encouraged him to accept God's plan. By interacting with his son in this matter, Abraham demonstrated love while showing respect for his son's individuality and free will.

The Authoritative Style in the Classroom

In our modern lifestyle, most children spend a significant amount of time with teachers. During the time together, students acquire academic and non-academic skills. It is a combination of these skills that molds and shapes children's attitudes toward life and their moral behavior. Research confirms that just as a parent-child relationship can influence the attitudes and behaviors of children, so does the teacher-student relationship. In a recent meta-analysis of more than 1,400 published studies, Martin Pinquart found that harsh discipline and psychological control by parents were the biggest predictors of worsening behavior in children over time.[11]

When using an authoritarian teaching style, the teacher maintains strict control and discipline, and allows little to no room for flexibility and individuality (see Figure 1). This type of teaching style demonstrates little warmth.[12] For example, one study of middle-school students showed that authoritarian teachers had a stifling impact on the academic growth of the children in the study, causing them to become more defensive about their learning, rather than becoming engaged.[13] Permissive teachers, on the other hand, although they lack the oppressive impact of authoritarian teachers, generally fail to provide the boundaries and structure young people need for optimal growth and development (see Figure 2).[14]
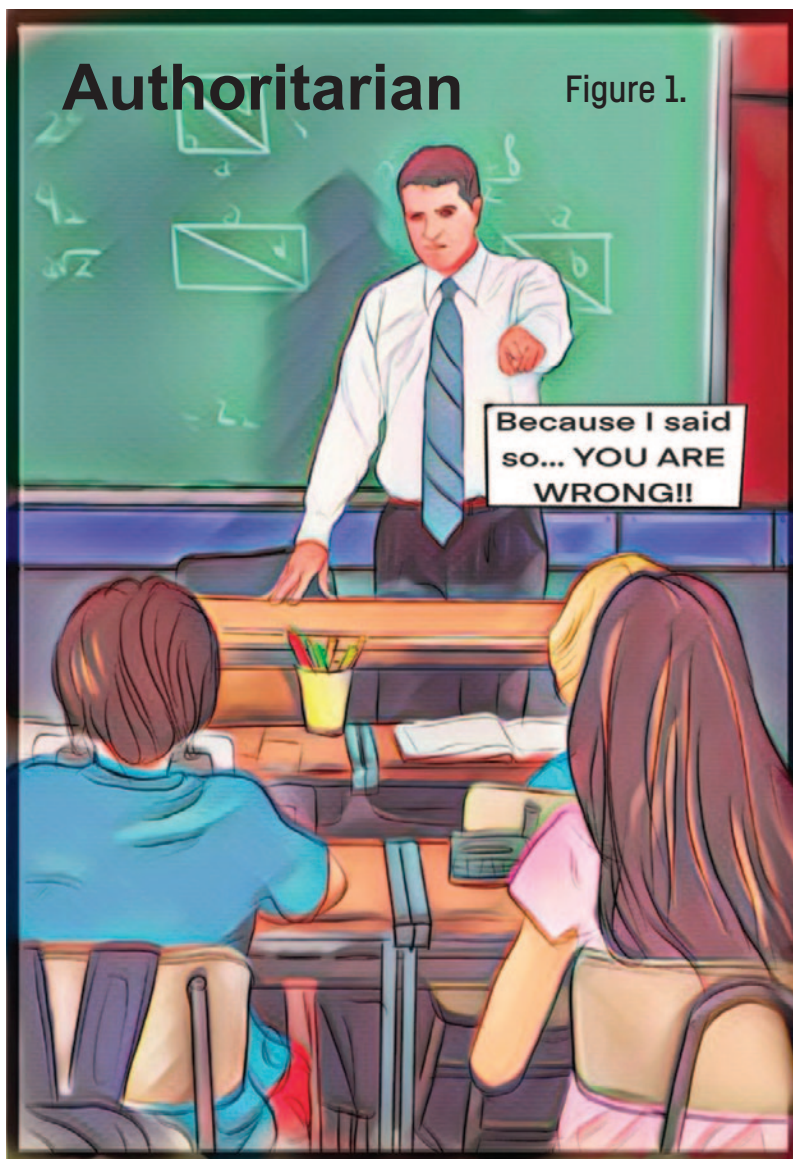
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However, when teachers employ an authoritative teaching style, this blends the *best* attributes of the authoritarian and permissive styles because it provides students with high expectations, the directed discipline they need, and the independence to achieve these expectations, combined with warmth, flexibility, understanding, and openness within the classroom (see Figure 3 on page 28). A teacher who practices the authoritative style in the classroom understands his or her role in creating a healthy balance between demonstrating compassion, love, tolerance, and understanding while establishing boundaries and creating a structured environment.[15]

Perhaps the greatest examples of authoritative teaching were provided by Jesus, the Master Teacher. The following three approaches offer ideal models for teachers and administrators:

1. *Use illustrations*: Jesus knew what it would take to focus on learning, so He made consistent use of illustrations (i.e., the term *parable* comes from the Greek term *παραβολή,* (*parabolé*) whose basic meaning is "comparison, figure").[16] Parables enabled His listeners to visualize vital concepts (Mark 4:33, 34).[17] After all, many people think in pictures.[18] Illustrations were critical to the growth and nurture of Jesus' students. They demonstrated His love for His pupils as shown in His genuine compliments (Matthew 8:5-10; Matthew 15:22-28; Mark 14:3-9; John 1:47). *Application:* Use stories and object lessons to present both simple and complex topics (see Sidebar 1 on page 30).

2. *Create a nurturing learning environment*: Jesus established control over His environment without demonstrating authoritarian behaviors. He provided students with autonomy by allowing them the opportunity to make decisions, while admonishing and correcting poor behavior (Matthew 14:22-34; John 21:15-17). His approach created an inherent desire among His followers to willingly draw close to Him, to listen, and to follow. And in such an environment, His followers were nurtured as they grew in their understanding of His teachings over time and even after He ascended. *Application:* Stay updated on the literature on effective classroom-management skills and tools that can help create a learning environment where students can thrive and develop a love for learning (see Sidebar 1).
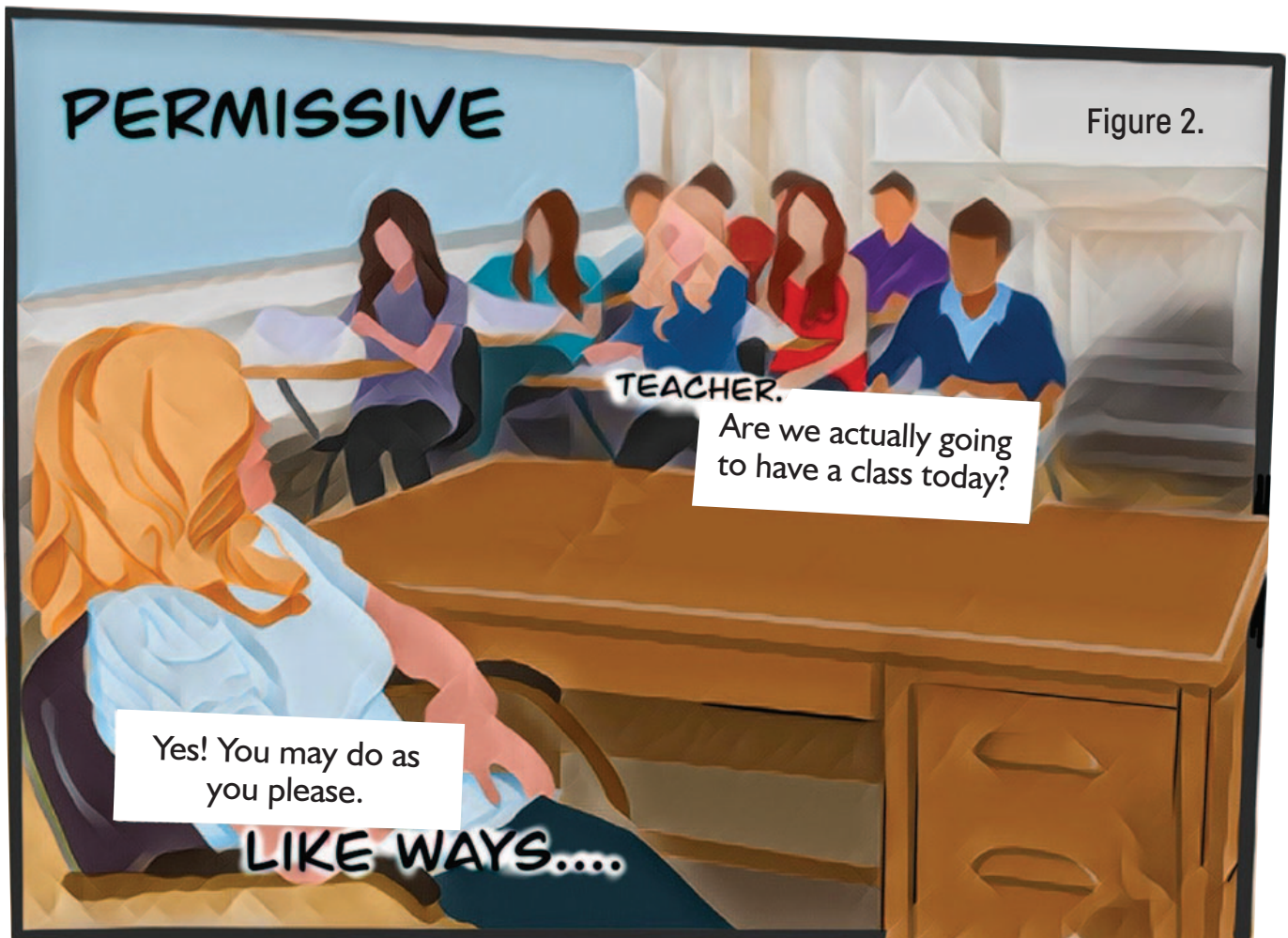

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Figure 3.

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3. *Demonstrate love:* Jesus was personally interested in each of His students. He demonstrated warmth, flexibility, and openness. His love was so strong that He was willing to challenge His students to grow beyond their perceived capacities (Matthew 14:22). Jesus not only loved His students but also challenged them to love one another (John 13:34, 35). *Application:* Take every opportunity to model Jesus' love to students; take an interest in them, get to know their families, cultivate positive relationships, and challenge them to demonstrate kindness to one another.

The authoritative approach is the recommended practice for educators. The objective of education is "to train young people to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other people's thought."[19] To accomplish these objectives, educators need to take every opportunity to apply the authoritative approach displayed by Jesus Christ into their daily interactions with students.

Conclusion

An authoritative approach to education is critical to the development of children and youth. This approach yields the highest probability of children becoming independent and critical thinkers because this will enable them to regulate their emotions, make

good decisions, and resist peer pressure. Additionally, children exposed to an authoritative style learn to respect adults, teachers, administrators, and other authority figures. They are more likely to demonstrate empathy, kindness, and warmth toward others, resulting in healthier relationships.

The authoritative approach can be reinforced in the classroom. The Bible makes it clear that teachers play a critical role in the development of children (Titus 2:7, 8). Teachers should encourage their students to be independent thinkers, while closely guiding them and modifying their expectations, depending on the situation and the students' needs. Teachers can

look at Jesus as the ultimate example of how to implement this style in the classroom. Identifying rules, limits, and consequences is very important while teaching, but so is being emotionally responsive, warm, and encouraging toward students. ✍

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