

PHILOSOPHY OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION IN TIME OF WAR: THE CASE OF CONGO

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Abstract

The philosophy of Adventist education is based on sound Biblical principles that promote the preparation of students for their life in this world and in the world to come. Being one of the largest educational systems in the world, the Adventist educational system claims to be unique in the holistic preparation of their students for a holistic life from the physical, mental, social, spiritual, and emotional perspectives of the human being. This paper presents the results of interviews, archival records, and observation done with Adventist educational leaders, principals, teachers, and students in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country that has been at war for the past 17 years. The study explored how the philosophy of Adventist education is affected when a country is constantly under the challenges of war.

Keywords: Case study, philosophy, Adventist education, Congo, Christian, spirituality, redemption, restoration, service, integration of faith and learning, K-12

1. Introduction

DESPITE its humble beginning, Adventist education has grown over more than a hundred years, to reach the worldwide proportions of the second largest denominational educational systems. It has spread to all the continents. It has had an important impact on education in the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter referred to as Congo), in the heart of Africa, for almost 80 years now. Yet, just like any other aspect of life in Congo, Adventist education has been threatened with repeated wars that have already lasted for 17 years and counting. While the news from this second largest country on the African continent abounds in the catastrophic impact on the Congolese people in general, no known study has been conducted on the impact of war on Adventist schools in general and especially on the implementation of the philosophy of Adventist education. If Adventist education must be understood well, it must be explored

also from extreme conditions such as those in Congo where war has claimed the lives of about 8 million people in less than just two decades.

The impact of war can no longer be analyzed solely from the general perspective; it must be explored from the Adventist perspective in order to begin an important discussion that can generate means and ways to mobilize educational and maybe church leaders to understand better the impact of war on Adventist education in countries that are affected. Given that the survival and progress of the Adventist Church depends on workers trained in Adventist schools; the church has interest in understanding this phenomenon to be able to deal with it effectively. This paper begins with a brief synthesis of the philosophy of the Adventist education before moving into the actual study.

2. Review Of The Literature

When we discuss philosophy in the academic arena, two possible definitions can be considered. According to Merriam Webster (electronic version, 2013), philosophy is "the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, esp. when considered as an academic discipline" or "a theory or attitude held by a person or organization that acts as a guiding principle for behavior." As important as the first definition is, for the purpose of this study, the second definition is at the heart of this paper. The philosophy of Adventist education is therefore considered as a theory or attitude that the Adventist church holds as guiding principle to educate their students.

From the philosophy of Adventist education, Adventists believe that God created the whole universe and continues to sustain it (ontology); that everything true, good and beautiful has their source in God (epistemology and axiology) (General Conference Policy Manual, 2003). The philosophy of Adventist education focuses on the work of redemption because Adventist education is expected to promote the restoration of the lost image in which human beings were created—the image of God (White, 1913, 2010). On this point, White (1893) believes that the work of an educator and the work of a preacher are one. They both focus on saving souls.

This focus on redemption and restoration calls for a third focus that makes these two possible. It is service. Because of the love that

human beings have for God and for one another, they are called to serve God and serve one another (Knight, 2010c; White, 2010). In fact, this focus on service is an important element of the philosophy of Adventist education. Adventists believe that educational institutions should “educate the youth of the church for service to God and their neighbors, rather than to train them for self-service through the acquisition of a ‘good job’ and a comfortable income” (Knight, 2010c, p. 55). Without this component, Adventist education is incomplete.

Another perspective to consider in the philosophy of Adventist education is the focus on mental, physical, social, spiritual, and emotional (Knight, 2010b). Adventist education is based on a holistic perspective of human development. The question has been asked, why is it that a large number of Adventist youth are leaving Adventist schools? Knight (2010a) answers, “dissatisfaction occurs when Adventist schools lose their distinctiveness and Adventist teachers fail to understand why their institutions must be unique” (p. 12). In fact, while financial challenges may be the cause of losing a number of Adventist students to non-Adventist schools, the loss of the distinctiveness of Adventist education is believed to play a much bigger role.

The worldwide Adventist educational system has a specific aim and mission. For Adventists, “Adventist education prepares students for a useful and joy-filled life, fostering friendship with God, whole-person development, Bible-based values, and selfless service in accordance with the Seventh-day Adventist mission to the world” (General Conference Policy Manual, 2003, p. 221). This holistic aim and mission of Adventist education can face challenges in times of war.

From the philosophy of Adventist education, Knight (2010a) draws three important implications for Adventist education. First, we should consciously examine our educational philosophy from the perspective of biblical Christianity. This would continually inform the decisions that we make on the implementation of the philosophy of Adventist education. Additionally, Adventist teachers need to carefully consider the implications of the Adventist philosophy for daily classroom activities, and then prayerfully implement that philosophy consistently and effectively.

While the distinctiveness of Adventist education can be clearly stated in its philosophy, its application may be different or maybe challenging when it comes to regions that are infested with repeated wars. Not much, if any, has been written on how the philosophy

of Adventist education holds when Adventist schools are located in war zones for a long period of time, hence, the purpose of this study.

3. Objective Of The Study

The current study is a follow up on two recent studies: one that explored the lived experiences of teachers of refugee students (Wa-Mbaleka, 2012b) and another that discussed the opportunities that technology offers to give another chance to refugee students in Africa (Wa-Mbaleka, 2012a). While these earlier writings focused on the effects of war on refugee teachers and students in general, they begged for a specific exploration of Adventist education in Congo, a country known to have the deadliest catastrophe of war since World War II. The leading objective was to explore, using a case study, the impact of war on Adventist education in general, and its influence on the philosophy of Adventist education. This exploratory case study specifically sought to explore how war is affecting the application of the philosophy of Adventist education in Congo, especially in one of the two conferences that have been the most affected by war since 1996 in eastern Congo.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study is based on an exploratory case study research design. Yin (2009) suggests case study research when the focus of the study is on a specific case in a real-life situation within a contemporary setting. In the present study, the case, or unit of analysis as defined by Miles and Huberman (1994), is K-12 Adventist education system in Congo. This research is an exploratory case study because it deals with a situation with unclear delimitations, variables, and outcomes (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). Additionally, since this research study will deal with only one single case of a country on war without the goal of comparing this case with other similar cases, it will be a within-site study, as defined by Creswell (2013). Last, this is an instrumental case study because it allows the researcher to understand more deeply the problem (Creswell, 2013)

of war on Adventist education, especially on the application of the philosophy of Adventist education.

Case study experts highly recommend that a case be bound (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). According to them, this is done by specifying the time and place that the study focuses on. Bounding a case "is similar to the development of inclusion and exclusion criteria for sample selection" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 547), although bounding a case also includes specific information on how broad and deep a case study will be.

This case study focuses on Adventist education in Congo as reflected in the zones that have been the most affected with war. Most of the data was collected from the one of the two conferences that have been the most affected with the catastrophic results of war on human lives. It focuses on the period from 1996 to 2013. The study is based primarily on the application of the philosophy of Adventist education, which focuses on redemption, service, and restoration.

4.2. Propositions

Baxter and Jack (2008) encourage researchers to define the propositions of their study. The propositions help the researcher to "place limits on the scope of the study and increase the feasibility of completing" it (p. 551). According to them, these propositions can be based on the researcher's personal experience, existing theories, or relevant review of the literature. The propositions outlined in this study are primarily based on the literature presented on the philosophy of Adventist education and on my personal knowledge of the negative effect that war has had on the Congolese people. First, war can have an impact on the application of the philosophy of Adventist education in K-12 educational system in Congo. Second, the spiritual life of both the students and educators is affected with the unending war in Congo. Last, negative practices of war criminals can be reflected in Adventist schools, even if these practices are directly opposed to the philosophy of Adventist education.

4.3. Sampling

Purposeful maximal sampling, as proposed by Creswell (2012), was used to select the few people who were interviewed. I preferred this sampling method because it provided an opportunity to obtain different perspectives on the problem under exploration. The five people who participated in this study included the president of the

conference, the director of the education department of the same conference, one superintendent, one high school principal, one elementary school principal, and two high school students.

4.4. Data Collection

Following Creswell's (2013) recommendations, this study used multiple sources of data. These included instructional artifacts (such as posters on classroom/office walls and lesson plans), administrative reports for important statistical data, field notes, and interviews with participants who could provide the best information possible on the case under exploration. The semi-structure, open-ended interview sessions followed an interview guide. Other probing questions came up during the interview sessions. All the interviewees participated voluntarily in this study. During the interviews, all participants authorized audio-recording the sessions.

4.5. Data Analysis

In the data analysis, the study followed three major steps that Creswell (2013) proposes. In the first one, I present full description of the case and any historical information that may be relevant to the study. To understand the case more deeply, I present the analysis of a few key themes from the data. Because data analysis began during data collection as Baxter and Jack (2008) seem to suggest, three strategies were used concurrently. The leading strategy was to continuously link the data and themes to the propositions that I had set at the beginning. Additionally, explanation building and pattern matching were two additional strategies that this study relied on. All this resulted from all the different data sources mentioned above.

5. Results

5.1. Description of the Case

The department of education of the conference provided the statistics of the 2012-2013 school year, which is the time this study was conducted. The conference that was studied, which is the largest in Congo, has 5 kindergartens, 139 elementary schools, and

80 secondary schools. It has 1,218 kindergarten and elementary school teachers and 915 secondary school teachers. It has 41,163 kindergarten and elementary school students and 14,937 secondary school students. Of all these statistics, 15 schools were located in red zones (zones with constant wars): 12 elementary and 3 secondary schools. These 15 schools included 112 teachers and 2,870 students.

5.2. Analysis of Themes

This case study was focused on the exploration of the impact of war on the philosophy of Adventist education in eastern Congo. At the beginning of each interview, each participant was asked to state what he understood by philosophy of Adventist education. All of them believed in the classic focus on the mental, physical, and spiritual development of students, as presented in the Spirit of Prophecy. It was obvious that all the research participants knew theoretically what is expected from Adventist education. From the interviews, field notes, and administrative documents that were used in this case study, a few interconnected themes became evident. This section presents these themes.

Financial challenges made it on top of the list with all the interviewees. They all believed that war makes life extremely challenging for students, their families, and therefore for the teachers. According to one interviewee, about 90% of education in Congo depends solely on tuition from students. When students are not able to pay their tuition, it significantly affects Adventist education. In turn, this has several ramifications.

When families have to run regularly from war, they are unable to develop sustainable activities that can generate enough funds for their own daily needs and the tuition of their children. Even during the few months when there is no war, these families cannot afford to pay their children's tuition. To be able to survive, educators, including Adventist teachers, depend highly on the tuition. When students do not pay, teachers send them home. And because families cannot afford it, students automatically drop out.

This dropout has a number of direct and indirect negative effects. First, the young person is no longer able to access Adventist education. Since the work of the educator and the work of the preacher is the same (White, 2010), this means that the ministry is automatically negatively affected. Second, since the youth is not occupied, they become prone to recruitment of rebel groups, which helps perpetrate more atrocities in cities and villages, steals

the youth from their innocence, destroys their whole life, and sustains the unending conflicts in eastern Congo. Even if rebels do not recruit them, the youth become prone to engaging in valueless entertainment that molds their minds for perdition. Third, the lack of the spiritual foundation of Adventist education creates a vacuum that becomes a fertile ground for sin. Last, since education prepares Church workers, the impact of the damage will be felt within the next few years when more church workers are needed.

War has a negative impact on the spiritual life of the students, their parents, and their educators. Students develop antisocial, immoral values. Prayer life is simply neglected. Everyone is discouraged, including church members. Some go into doubting the love of God who is so powerful and yet so uncaring about the innocent people who are suffering the consequences of war. Some students turn to drugs and smoking to alleviate the psychological pain, while a few commit or contemplate suicide because they find no meaning for life. Students who become internally displaced, live in isolation, which can in turn cause depression. Depression too affects negatively the spirituality of the students, their parents, and their educators. Some positive effect has also been found on the spiritual life of the students, their parents, and their educators. For some, this is a sign of the times and it should be a wake-up call for personal spiritual revival.

Some students and educators have faced some of the worst atrocities in the world in the modern era. Some have witnessed rape and killings in broad daylight, kidnapping of both educators and students, decapitation of some school principals, etc. Such atrocities demoralize educators and students, cause students to come to school late, which removes time for morning worship in schools and classrooms. In other cases, this causes some students, and even educators, to become aggressive in dealing with conflict.

Another theme that became evident was the limited accessibility to Adventist education. Within the red zones, 50% of teachers are believed to be non-Adventist teachers. Additionally, when students run away from war, they may spend at least 25- 50% of the school year without studying. All these are factors that deprive students in the red zones from accessing quality Adventist education. A sizable number of teachers in red zones completed only the equivalent of Grade 8 or 9. This is because qualified teachers do not want to work in red zones. The teachers who do work there have not been trained in how to deliver Adventist education.

6. Lessons Learned

From this case study, it is obvious that war is significantly affecting Adventist education in eastern Congo. It is doing so more negatively than positively. It is affecting the students, the educators, and even the Adventist church. Some work must be done to help meet the needs of Adventist education in this and other similar regions.

A few initiatives have been made to help alleviate the impact of war on Adventist education. The department of education has been organizing some workshops to support the educators that are in the red zones psychologically, spiritually, and emotionally. Additionally, when a school structure is burned to the ground, some funds are sometimes sent to help rebuild it. Last, the department collects a fund from all the schools of the conference to provide regular financial assistance, no matter how limited, to teachers who are working in red zones because the latter cannot financially survive on the extremely limited tuition fees that they collect from their students. One of the principals indicated that they have put in place a special program for students who are seriously affected by war. Every year, they analyze all the extreme cases and waive their tuition fees. I met three such students, who were the poorest of the 230 students of that high school.

Initiatives like these ones must be encouraged. Additionally, other creative ways need to be discussed at the conference, the union, and even the division level to sustain the fragile effort of supporting Adventist education in the affected regions. The local schools, districts, and conferences alone cannot meet the needs that war creates in Adventist schools. For instance, having some partnership between churches or schools from other divisions, countries, or continents could help meet the very basic needs that Adventist education faces in red zones. Additionally, it may be important to create a special department to deal with war victims in a conference, union, and division where war lasts for several years. The impact of war cannot just be ignored and be dealt with without any special, intentional effort. As for the church organization, some special offering could be collected on a yearly basis to help specifically with education in red zones, to make sure accessibility to quality Adventist education is sustained.

It was evident from the interviews that many students and educators live with undiagnosed and untreated trauma that can affect their spiritual and emotional life. The final recommendation is to have trained Adventist workers who can offer counseling

services to both students and educators who have had traumatic experiences during war. Such workers must be strong in their spiritual walk, and with proper training in counseling and in education.

Further research is needed on the impact of war on the Adventist Church, on education in general, and on spirituality. Additional research could also include a Delphi study to generate practical solutions to the problems that church members, students and educators face in red zones.

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