

Creating a Christ-Centered School Climate for Educational Excellence: Philosophical, Instructional, Relational, Assessment, and Counseling Dimensions

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Abstract

Interest is peaking among educators in North America, and around the world, on issues relating to school climate. A primary reason for this strong interest is research confirmation that school climate may have a positive or negative effect on educational processes. A Christ-Centered school climate provides the best opportunities for stakeholders to work collaboratively to achieve four primary educational outcomes. These are: (1) creating and sustaining bias free learning environments where relationships are nurtured by love, respect, tolerance, and kindness; (2) establishing faith-based instructional and service learning programs which cater to the needs of students; and (3) utilizing quality assessment tools to measure school climate, and instructional goals/objectives. This is a monumental task, but it can be accomplished if stakeholders are deeply and passionately committed to the foundational tenets of Christian education.

Introduction

There is heightened interest on matters pertaining to school climate among educational stakeholders in North America, and around the world. A primary reason for this interest is strong research evidence, which confirms that school climate may impede or enhance educational outcomes (Thapa, Cohen, Higgins-D'Alessandro & Guffey, 2012). Since the 1950s, educators are becoming more involved in systematic studies of school climate. (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli and Pickeral, 2009). A landmark meta-analysis study conducted by Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1997) revealed that school culture and climate were extremely influential in promoting student achievement. Other significant studies have confirmed, that that school climate impacts students' self-esteem (Hoge, Smit, & Hanson, 1990), and affects emotional and health outcomes of students (Kuperminic, Leadbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997).

Conceptualizations of the importance of school climate have been documented in educational literature for many years. Perry (1908), was probably the first educator to write about the significance and impact of school climate on students' learning.

Loukas (2007) referred to the challenges of creating a concise definition of school climate. He concluded that most researchers agreed on its multidimensional nature, that incorporates: (1) the physical dimension, which is comprised of the school building, school size, ratio of students to teachers in the classroom, resources available, and comfort and safety; (2) the social dimension, which includes the quality of interpersonal relationships among school personnel, the fair and equitable treatment of students by teachers and staff, the degree of competition and social comparison between students, and the degree to which all school personnel are involved in decision making; and (3) the academic dimension, which refers to the quality of instruction offered, teacher expectations for student achievement, monitoring the progress of students, and sharing such results with parents. Tableman and Herron (2004) shared the views of Loukas (2007) on the academic,

physical and social dimensions of school climate, however they introduced an *affective* dimension which includes feelings of belonging and positive self-esteem among teachers, students, and staff.

Cohen (2006) acknowledges that school climate is defined by eleven factors, namely: (1) structural issues (e.g., size of the school); (2) environmental (e.g., cleanliness); (3) socio- emotional, physical order, and safety; (4) expectations for student achievement; (5) quality of instruction; (6) collaboration and communication; (7) sense of school community; (8) peer norms; (9) school-home based community partnerships; (10) student morale; and (11) the extent to which the school is a vital learning community (p. 212).

It is clearly evident, from the views of Perry (1908); Table & Herron (2004); Cohen, (2006); & Loukas (2007) that the pulse of a school's climate may be measured by the perceptions, behaviors, attitudes, and feelings of inclusion by those who are directly or indirectly involved in the process of education. These are stakeholders, administrators, teachers, students, parents, auxiliary staff, board members, and community personnel.

This article focuses on five significant dimensions of school climate, which profoundly influence the instructional, developmental, and learning processes of educational institutions. These are: (1) philosophical; (2) instructional; (3) relational; (4) assessment; and (5) counseling. It emphasizes how each dimension positively affects educational outcomes through intentional, and developmentally appropriate Christ-Centered teaching and learning approaches.

The Philosophical Dimension

Many initiatives have been undertaken by educational systems around the world, to measure and improve school climate. However, stakeholders who are directly or indirectly involved in the creating and sustaining such meaningful climates for optimum learning outcomes, will not be able to fully and comprehensively achieve these goals until they espouse a philosophy which first establishes God as the "Source of all true knowledge, and the Holy Scriptures as the perfect standard of truth" (White, 1903, pp. 16 &17).

A philosophy of education is important because it defines the purpose, and focus of an educational institution. It becomes a part of its mission statement, which in turn defines what subjects are taught, how they are taught, and, perhaps more importantly, the values that are taught both implicitly and explicitly along with the subjects being covered (Thompson, 2007, para 2).

A Christocentric educational philosophy emphasizes not only academic knowledge, but stresses balanced development of the spiritual, intellect, physical, emotional and social powers of each student. It also provides educational administrators, teachers, and parents with opportunities to establish a climate of learning in which students are taught to: (1) envision the world as God envisions it; (2) embrace the world as God embraces it, and (3) love people unconditionally, as God loves people unconditionally.

The products of these endeavors are: (1) character building which is informed by God's personhood; (2) faith in God development; (3) exhibiting respect for the dignity of all human beings; (4) developing original, reflexive, and independent thinking skills; (5) giving loving service to God and mankind; and (6) embracing all that is true, good, and beautiful (General Conference Policy Manual, 2003, p. 221). It is only as the mind of Christ is nurtured in all educational stakeholders, that these products can be realized. Philippians 2:5 should permeate every facet of the each dimension of the educational process. It reads "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus (New King James Version).

The Instructional Dimension

Teachers have been given the awesome responsibility to create a climate in which instructional excellence is reinforced, and where students are provided with the necessary tools for effective service to God and mankind. The pathways toward optimum instructional excellence are carved out by teachers who have accepted God's call to serve in this capacity. Some essential teacher qualities and characteristics which are vital to the instructional climate include: (1) recognizing God's call to the ministry of teaching; (2) depending on God continually for counsel, guidance, patience and fortitude; (3) integrating and synthesizing their Christian faith with teaching, scholarship and service; (4) demonstrating in word and deed, that the ultimate objective of education is the salvation of men and women, boys and girls; (5) exhibiting genuine unconditional love for students, and colleagues regardless of their cultural, social, economic, or religious backgrounds; (6) exuding a passion and enthusiasm for teaching; (7) communicating and applying knowledge in the classroom, generated from personal experience, academic and professional training, continuing education, and in-service activities; (8) becoming lifelong, infectious, and contagious learners; (9) teaching students the art of peacemaking; (10) being committed to ongoing professional development; (11) implementing instructional approaches and best practices which are uniquely relevant to the individual learning styles and abilities of students; (12) espousing the belief that all students must succeed (regardless of their, genetic, physical, social, intellectual, cultural, or behavioral challenges; (13) adopting best practices in teaching and learning; (14) maintaining optimum physical, spiritual, psychological, and emotional health to deal more effectively with the ongoing demands and challenges of the teaching and learning environment; (15) being advocates for students; (16) providing students with opportunities to engage in activities/projects which benefit churches, schools, homes, and communities; and (17) ensuring that the physical layout of their schools contributes to students' learning, health and safety.

Roles and Functions of School Administrators

The support of the educational administrators is critical to the viability of the instructional environment. These leaders are in a position to empower teachers to do the work for which they have been commissioned by God to do. Committed educational administrators: (1) recognize that they are called of God to the ministry of educational administration; (2) apply and synthesize their Christian faith with teaching, learning, and administration; (3) demonstrate in word and deed that the ultimate objective of education is the salvation of men and women, boys and girls; (4) exhibit unconditional love for teachers, students, parents, and fellow administrators; (5) demonstrate a passion and enthusiasm for teaching and administration; (6) communicate and apply knowledge generated from their personal experiences, and their academic and professional preparation to enhance the teaching and learning process; (7) espouse the values and attributes of servant leaders; (8) possess strong social, interpersonal, intrapersonal and collaborative skills; (9) empower their teachers and fellow administrators, to effectively perform their roles and functions; (10) clearly articulate the philosophy, vision, mission, goals, objectives, and outcomes of the institutions to which they are assigned; (11) model best practices in educational administration, research, assessment, and service, in collaboration with teachers and other stakeholders; and (12) forge meaningful partnerships with community personnel who support their institution's philosophy, vision, mission, goals, objectives and learning outcomes.

Administrators should take the lead in encouraging parents to become involved in the activities of a school. This is a critical component of the instructional environment. Schools should inform families about school programs and student progress with school-to-home, and home-to-school

communications. This creates channels of communication between families, teachers, and administrators; (2) schools can involve families with their children in academic learning activities at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curricular-linked activities; (3) families should be included as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through PTA committees, councils and other parent organizations (Epstein et al., 2002).

A community-school partnership can be instrumental in creating pathways for students to achieve their academic, professional, socio-cultural, civic, and spiritual goals. There is growing evidence which confirms that successful collaboration between school and community groups has led to improved academic and social/emotional outcomes of youth (Mastro and Grenz Jalloh, 2005). When community groups and schools develop educational community partnerships, positive results include: (1) upgraded school facilities; (2) improved school leadership and staffing; (3) higher quality learning programs for students; new resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum; (4) resources for after-school programs and family supports; and (5) increased social and political capital of participants (Iowa School Boards Foundation, 2007, p. 2).

Opportunities must be created for students to work with faith-based organizations such as, churches, synagogues, Maranatha Volunteers International, Adventist Development Relief Agency, and Prison Programs. What better way to demonstrate one's loyalty and love for God, than through selfless service to others who are in need? This should be the essence of all educational endeavors. God promises that if we show this kind of compassion to the hungry, naked, poor, weak, infirmed, disenfranchised, ostracized, and marginalized, then our salvation will come like the dawn, our wounds will quickly heal, our godliness will lead us forward, and God's glory will protect us from behind. Then when we call, He will answer, and quickly reply, "I am here." Our light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around us will be as bright as noon. The lord will guide us continually, and give us water when we are dry, and will restore our strength. We will be like a well-watered garden, like an ever-flowing spring (Isaiah 58: 8, 9, & 11, New Living Translation). This is, no doubt, one of the strongest evidences of instructional excellence.

The Relational Dimension

This dimension is probably the crux of the educational enterprise, since it focuses on developing and sustaining genuine social interactions among students, teachers, administrators, parents, community leaders, volunteers, and auxiliary staff. Each constituent member of a school system has a responsibility to engage in self- development experiences, insight promoting activities and bias reduction events to ensure that they have the "EQ" emotional quotient to develop healthy relationships with others. Individuals with these relational skills will naturally foster collaborative and caring learning communities that are vital to the energy and life of educational institutions. Without them, all other dimensions of the educational enterprise (philosophical, instructional and assessment) lose their significance, and potency.

Hiatt-Michael (2001) proposed that a learning community is one in which all members acquire new ideas, and accept responsibility for making the organization work. She reiterated that all the workers, from the school gardener to the school district leader, must feel that their insights are valued, and taken into account in community life. In addition, parents and students have to be seen as participants in the life of the school, not simply as recipients of services that the professionals deemed important.

Gootman (2008) fully grasped the essence of the essential attributes of a caring classroom community. She stated "all classrooms are communities, but not all classrooms are caring communities. What makes a classroom community a caring community? It is when everyone, including teachers, students, and parents, feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to each

other. It is when everyone is treated with kindness, respect and helpfulness. It is when everyone has a mutual sense of responsibility" (p. 6). In a Christ-Centered caring classroom community: (1) unconditional love permeates the fabric of relationships; (2) the spiritual nurturing of children is a priority; (3) diversity is celebrated; the needs of learners are satisfied; (4) Christian faith is embedded throughout the curricular and the extra-curricular activities; (5) quality instructional and emotional assistance is provided for students who are experiencing difficulty in achieving learning and behavioral goals; (6) students' efforts are celebrated, even when they did not achieve stipulated learning goals and objectives (7) the strengths of students are emphasized; (8) administrators, teachers, students, auxiliary staff, and parents emulate the mind and character of Christ; (9) the fruits of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control) are reflected in the daily activities and functions of school personnel (Galatians 5:22, 23, New International Version).

The relational dimension of education may be most accurately reflected in the way that Christ was able to connect at the deepest level with humankind. It was written of Him that "in every human being He discerned infinite possibilities. He saw men as they might be, transfigured by His grace—"in the beauty of the Lord our God (Psalm 90:17)." Looking upon them with hope, He inspired hope. Meeting them with confidence, He inspired trust" (White, 1903, p. 80).

The Assessment Dimension

Assessment is needed to determine how well students are achieving the tasks of learning. Slavin (2013) emphasized that assessment may serve important purposes, such as: (1) providing feedback to students on the results of their efforts, so that they will be able to utilize strategies which will enhance or improve their chances of success; (2) providing feedback to teachers on the effectiveness of their instructional strategies so that they can, if necessary, make adjustments and accommodations which will improve students' retention of the content of lessons presented; (3) providing information to parents, so that they can become more aware of the need to work collaboratively with teachers in establishing optimum learning environments for their children; and (4) motivating students to do their best. Rewards such as grades or prizes can be given to them for accomplishing certain tasks. Two major forms of assessments are used to determine how well students are adjustment to the challenges and expectations of the school environment. These are (1) classroom assessment; and (2) school climate assessment.

Classroom Assessment

Classroom assessment is an approach designed to help teachers find out what students are learning in the classroom, and how well they are learning it. According to Angelo & Cross (1993) this approach is learner-centered, teacher-directed, mutually beneficial, formative, context-specific, ongoing, and firmly rooted in good practice (p. 4).

The effectiveness of classroom assessment in Christ-Centered institutions is predicated on the extent to which students perceive that the highest forms of learning are realized, when elements of the philosophical foundations of their schools, i.e., Christian faith, character development, unconditional love, spiritual nurturing, intellectual, physical, and social development, student dispositions, and true religion) are inextricably tied to classroom learning outcomes. The challenge for educators is to develop and/or refine models of teaching and learning which reflect the integration of these learning outcomes.

School Climate Assessment

Since school climate is a strong indicator of the quality of learning outcomes and relationships among the primary stakeholders, it is therefore necessary to develop ways and means of assessing it. It is probably one of the best measures of accountability. School climate is best evaluated with surveys that have been developed in a scientifically sound manner, and are comprehensive in two ways: (1) recognizing student, parent, and school personnel voice; and (2) assessing all the dimensions that color and shape the process of teaching and learning, and educators' and students' experience in the school building (Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2009, p. 1). In Christ-Centered schools, stakeholders must be given opportunities to record their perceptions of how well their institutions are fulfilling the philosophical mandate for educational excellence.

The Counseling Dimension

By nature, Christian institutions have been instructed to care for those in attendance as a sign of obedience to Christ. One way in which Christian institutions can address the needs of students is to promote the use of counseling services. These may be psychological, emotional, medical, spiritual, vocational or academic in nature, and are usually provided to students and teachers by trained licensed professional. These services are geared towards meeting the unique and diverse needs of those who seek it. Promoting a service which celebrates unique stories and experiences can contribute to the sense that a person is being cared for and that each person matters.

Several factors speak to the relevance of counseling services in Christian institutions. The first consists of promoting the biblical message of caring for those who are hurting. The concept of seeing another's need for care and healing is central to the nature of Christ and therefore of utmost significance for those who consider themselves Christ-followers. Even as Christ was dying He was able to see His mother in front of Him in need of someone to care for her (John 19:26-27). It is this call to identify the needs of and care for those around us that speak to the significance of mental health services in Christian institutions.

Secondly, not all students who attend a Christian institution are religious, or spiritual. What better way to be the hands and feet of Jesus then to be attuned to their mental and emotional needs, recognizing that every person is made in the image of God and therefore emotional by nature invites the institution to respond to the emotional needs of a person. It is through this action that a person's inner-life and experiences can be honored and also serve as a testimony Christian institutions.

Thirdly, religion and counseling have often been in opposition. However, as Sullivan et al (2014, p. 1273) has reported, both the mental health field and religious groups are "moving from a period of 'antagonism' to 'mutual understanding.'" This mutual understanding can be altered to a more integrative stance of valuing both religion and science to bring about the common goal of promoting human flourishing. Christian institutions play a major role in shaping those who will impact the future relationship of mental health and Christianity. If, while studying at a Christian institution, a person is able to utilize psychological service and find it to be valuable, it would be assumed that this person may promote the use of mental health services in their future work. Thus continuing to positively affect the relationship between psychology and religion.

In theory all Christian institutions should promote the idea of caring for one another (e.g. bearing one another's burdens). However, it is often hard to bring this theory into fruition when policies, procedures, or the business of academia are at the forefront of importance. One way in which Christian institutions can exercise this desire to truly care for one another is by providing counseling

services to students, faculty, and staff. It is through these services that a theoretical gospel becomes reality.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of Christian teachers, educational administrators, parents, and community leaders is to shape and nurture the minds and hearts of students for meaningful service to God and mankind. They need to work collaboratively to create a caring and responsive school climate by integrating each of the five dimensions within the curricular and extra-curricular programs of their schools.

In comparison with other educational stakeholders, teachers spend more hours each week in supervising, instructing and advising students. Therefore, their quintessential role is that of demonstrating evidence, and identifying ways of action that underscore the possibility of an authentic bridging of the divide between the ideals of Christian faith, and the lived experience of Christians. It is upon this demonstration that commitment grows, disbelief evaporates, and faith is confirmed (Matthews & Gabriel, 2001, p. 34). In relation to the five dimensions of school climate, this 'bridging of the divide between the ideals of Christian faith (creed), and the lived experience of Christians' (deed), must be reflected and reinforced in the daily interactions between students and teachers.

There is no system or structure of education that can match the long-term benefits to be derived from one which is Christ-Centered. "It cannot be gotten for gold neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof. It cannot be valued with the gold of Ophir, with the precious onyx, or the sapphire. The gold and the crystal cannot equal it, and the exchange of it shall not be for jewels of fine gold. No mention shall be made of the coral, or of pearls: For the price of wisdom is above rubies (Job 28: 15-18, King James Version).

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