

Creating Positive Learning Environments

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Teaching today has become a stressful occupation, with many believing that the time has come for teachers to be paid risk and stress allowances. It appears that teachers no longer see the school environment as a haven. Instead, many now view their schools as battlefields or minefields.

Several explanations have been advanced for this state of affairs. Some argue that societies have changed over time; others insist that our schools are only reflections of our societies; while still others believe that the situation is due to a combination of both. Whatever the causes, as a society, we have to educate our young. We are therefore obliged to create environments in our schools which will facilitate the educational process.

Addressing a graduating class of aspiring school principals at the University of Houston, Dr. Karon Rilling, Principal of Humble Middle School, Humble, Texas advised: "We have to assure these children that while they are with us they are safe and will be treated well. For some that may be all we can do but we must do that. We may not be able to control what goes on in any child's life before or after school. But here they will not be abused and they will be treated fairly. And they will be protected and they will be respected. And we're going to help them learn how life can be."

Dr. Rilling was offering a partial solution for addressing the turbulent environments of our schools. To my mind, she was emphasising the need to create positive learning climates in our schools. According to the available literature, high-performance schools must be orderly places, characterised by high standards, high expectations, and a caring environment. The consensus is that schools must be places where misbehaviour is dealt with consistently, quickly, fairly, and openly.

Research has shown that this cannot be realised if administrators and teachers fail to ensure a school climate characterised by: clear, firm, and professional administrator and teacher behaviour; consistent rules, with accompanying penalties for breaking them; a decided emphasis on the self-esteem of all students; and public and private acknowledgement and rewarding of positive student behaviour.

In 1997, two researchers, Ubben and Hughes, warned that these practices would only be effective when it is recognised that schooling occurs in a group context and that, consequently, the behaviour of an individual student will have an immediate impact on the behaviour of others; and that learning occurs best in an orderly environment.

Generally, educators agree that an orderly environment can be best achieved by policies and strategies that promote self-regulation of behaviour (internal control) rather than policies and strategies designed to enforce compliance with elaborate control mechanisms and a strong dependence on punishment (external control). It has also been established that the environment is enhanced when staff behave in an orderly and internally

controlled way, and when the rules to guide behaviour are simple, well known, and continuously reinforced.

So far, I have been discussing the internal factors that contribute to positive school climates. Unfortunately, schools do not operate in a vacuum. Societal forces inevitably impact on them. National educational policies, parental involvement, and criminal and other negative social influences all tend to impact on schools.

Chalkdust must be commended for advising us that things (even in education) should not be done “just so!” Very often we fail to understand that we are the ones who more often than not create our own crises. For example, we talk of discipline as if it is a phenomenon that is exclusively student generated and appears naturally in schools. However, research has shown that we have allowed disorder and the lack of student control to emerge in schools because of our failure to prevent the development of large, impersonal, and alienated groups of students in them.

Therefore, attempts must be made to establish focused, small groups within schools. Some educators have identified creative use of the house system as a meaningful mechanism towards this end. Others have suggested that administrators and staff be trained to develop and maintain positive school environments. This, they insist, must be linked to school rules and regulations designed to enhance the education of students as well as promote their interest and welfare. They further caution that administrators and staff must have the determination to serve and care.

Globally, schools with positive learning environments have been found to be characterised by: mutual expressions of appreciation among students, teachers, and auxiliary staff; mechanisms for the early identification of students who are drifting from the central purpose of schooling; orderliness and a compassionate concern for the security of all members of the school; and action-oriented programmes designed to create a humane environment.

In addition, it should be noted that schools with positive climates always have a tradition that acknowledges achievement of teachers and students. Strategies for developing such a culture include public ceremonies, bulletin board exhibits, enthusiastic ovations at assemblies, prizes, badges, friendly taps on the shoulder, and sincere praise.

It has also been discovered that community volunteer programmes with high parental and adult involvement help to reduce the incidence of violence and gang activity in schools. Researchers argue that these have been successful because children tend to behave and feel safe when there is a conspicuous presence of adults.

Whatever strategies schools may develop, it cannot be denied that the main business of the school is the delivery of a relevant and meaningful curriculum. Consequently, schools must constantly attempt to address the academic as well as the non-academic needs of students. For us in Trinidad and Tobago the implications should be clear: National educational policy must never allow overcrowding in schools. Students should never be

placed in situations in which they are plagued by a lack of furniture and equipment, and forced to participate in programmes for which they have little or no aptitude.

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