

Open-Climate Schools

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Educational reform in Trinidad and Tobago seems to be guided by the belief that education needs can be addressed by: 1) building more schools, 2) engaging in curriculum reform, 3) intensified teacher and principal preparation programmes, and 4) student support programmes. While all of these initiatives are necessary and laudable in their own right, they cannot be sufficient for establishing, promoting, and institutionalising an education system that has to respond to the imperatives of the 21st century. Education systems, and by extension schools, need to be characterised by support at all levels, encouragement from all stakeholders, and school climates that exude collegiality, warmth and goodwill. This has become necessary because contemporary civilisation seems increasingly and unwittingly to have replaced the intimacy and warmth of primary groups with the cold calculation of secondary groups, thereby creating artificial distance in organisations and among people in communities and nations. Perhaps this is why today our youth find it so easy to kill off one another.

What can we do to set things right? Almost four decades ago, Andrew Halpin, a well-respected researcher in educational administration published the findings of a study that highlighted the importance of school climate to school effectiveness. Since then, other North American researchers, Professor Wayne Hoy and Sharon Clover, for example, have accepted school climate as critical to understanding school effectiveness and school governance.

I, too, have been converted to the significance of school climate. My faith is based on beliefs shared worldwide that: 1) producing such positive student outcomes as self-concept, supporting and caring for others, social responsibility, commitment to school; motivation, and achievement are among the main reasons for establishing school systems; 2) positive student outcomes are inevitably related to teacher and successful principal behaviour; and 3) successful principal behaviour can be defined in terms of the principal's ability to influence teachers.

The literature informs us that school climates, just as individuals, have different personalities and that they can be nurtured. Contrary to what we so frequently witness in our nation, researcher Andrew Halpin argues that it is possible to create school climates in which principals and teachers “are zestful and exude confidence” and in which students' self-concept and commitment to school can be positively developed, their motivation enhanced, and such negative outcomes as absenteeism and vandalism reduced or eliminated.

Such climates, however, cannot be created overnight or by fiat. They are the result of people who, over time, interact with one another in them. In other words, school climates tend to reflect the leadership style of their respective principals and the attitudes of teachers and students who are in them.

Consensus in the literature seems to favour open school climates, which help to promote positive student outcomes and contribute to good mental health and job satisfaction of teachers and principals.

According to Hoy and Clover, the following characterise such climates: cooperation, collegiality, respect, and trust among teachers and principal; supportive administrator leadership; teacher autonomy and empowerment; and teacher commitment.

An open school climate cannot spontaneously emerge overnight; it must be the outcome of well-conceptualised, designed, and implemented teacher development and principal preparation programmes. It is also the result of sound recruitment policies, which are characterised by good personality profile instruments. We can no longer appoint our teachers and principals only on the basis of seniority and certification.

As I see it, the time has come for us to understand that school effectiveness and education reform will be realised only when more attention is given to the development of open climate schools.

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