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Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

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Imbedding Christian Values in the Public Education Setting:

Creating a Democratic Classroom Environment

Schools serve as a primary institution in which the youth of society will acquire skill sets and form a knowledge base that they can carry on into adult hood, eventually becoming responsible contributors to society. Education is a cognitive process that stems from the intrinsic nature in children to be curious and discover the world. This intrinsic nature is a gift from God imbedded in man at the time of creation. As such, an individual's ability to perceive, retain and apply information starts at infancy and develops over time.

While the basis of today's public education setting includes a basic understanding of the core skills (reading, writing and basic arithmetic), these skills alone are not enough for a student to achieve success. A student must also learn, through the education and spiritual process, courage, confidence and life skills, in order to survive in today's society. Furthermore, the ability to apply the core skills is necessary in order for an individual fully to achieve his or her potential. Through education and the learning process, an individual undergoes a transformation, gaining an understanding and appreciation of the world.

Discipline problems in schools continue to be one of the greatest causes of concern for educators in schools today. The Bible, in Proverbs 22:6, commands, "train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old he will not depart from it." This verse is a clear promise and direction from God. As such, it is not a coincidence that as prayer and the Bible are removed from schools, children are able to test the boundaries of their teachers and parents, which in turn

leads to disciplinary challenges. As the training opportunities are removed, the discipline problems are increased.

Many public opinion polls have cited discipline as a major problem in the schools that constantly remains unchanged and can only be addressed by the reinstitution of democratic principles in schools. For example, in a study conducted by the research firm Public Agenda, 61% of teachers and 63% of parents demonstrated belief that strictly enforcing smaller rules sets a tone that may help prevent bigger problems. In the same study, 78% of teachers and 74% of parents stated that only a handful of students cause most of the problems (Education Digest, 2008).

An ineffective system of discipline can affect all aspects of education. Students who misbehave in school are more likely to drop out and are at greater risk for drug and alcohol addictions (Carey, n.d.). They will also lack the education necessary to achieve success and realize their potential, as the lack of education requires an individual to live an existence filled with darkness. Thus, the pursuit of education will enable an individual to become free from darkness.

Life is a self-renewing process that occurs through an individual's action upon the environment. The term "life" refers to the individual's customs, institutions, beliefs, victories and defeats (Dewey, n.d.). The continuity of any experience occurs through the renewing and development of social contacts, and education serves as the social continuity for life.

The ideal educational setting provides a forum by which individuals are able to learn their talents and use those talents to define their ambitions and pursue their goals. Teachers serve as the core to achieving this ideal setting. The most effective teachers are those who encourage critical thinking and discussion among the students. Teachers must do this by providing wisdom

and guidance and creating a learning environment that enables students to realize the practical application of information presented.

According to an article written by John Dewey entitled "Democracy and Education," society exists as a result of the process of transmission. This transmission occurs as individuals engage in communication with one another, thereby expressing ideas, hopes and opinions. Without communication, social lives would cease to exist (Dewey, n.d.). Communication is meant to develop intimacy. Just as God demands communication from us, He also wants to see us develop social relationships, or love, for one another. John 13:31 states, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." It is necessary to mention that, even within social groups, it is possible not to develop social relationships. This occurs when individuals use one another to achieve desired results, or seek out means to be in a position of superiority over another. Many teacher – student relationships fall within this category, as the giving and taking of orders results in a lack of sharing or purpose (Dewey, n.d.)

The theory of "formal discipline" has emerged from formal education, with its ultimate objective as establishing specific powers in accomplishment and in the structured training of minds such that responses to stimulus are adapted and easy to come by. The theory has its roots in biblical instructions, whereas the parents or authoritative figures are instructed to "spare the rod, spoil the child" (Proverbs 13:24). This means that students must recognize that if their actions fall outside of the established boundaries, will have consequences.

In considering the need for formal discipline, consider the experience of Dottie Jensen, a twenty-five year classroom teacher veteran. Jenson is an advocate of a strongly enforced code of student conduct and states that "codes of conduct and discipline can't be sometimes propositions.

They must be enforced consistently so that everyone knows that the rules matter" (Education Digest, 2008).

Based on the literature, it is evident that successful teachers must create learning environments that seek to minimize inconsistencies between understanding and experience. For many teachers, this is where the challenge lies, as students in the public education setting come from varied backgrounds and experiences, and thus will respond to information in different ways. At the same time, teachers must ensure that learning occurs by engaging the students in learning experiences that are high interest. In essence, this method of teaching allows the students to incorporate problems that are important to them (Hoover, 1996) and that celebrate their uniqueness.

The appreciation of uniqueness in all students is central to promoting a safe environment. Each individual has been created with different talents that need to be cultivated. As such, appreciating uniqueness creates the forefront for setting boundaries. Students should participate in the establishment of the guidelines for discussion. Teachers can build on communication patterns by recognizing that each dimension of communication "identifies with certain skills and underlies certain problems that could facilitate or inhibit effective communication" (Jreisat, 147). The promotion of discussion is central to promoting democracy in the classroom.

By enabling students to participate in the classroom setting, students are being introduced to concepts of democracy that can aide them in future participation in the public process. According to Denhardt and Denhardt (2006), "more and more, public decisions are being made through meaningful interaction with citizens. This means that citizens are playing an important role not as recipients of government services but as contributors to the policies and programs that affect their lives" (p. 443).

If participation in the classroom is encouraged, perhaps, then, threats to democracy in modern day America can be overcome. More than one million voters failed to express their vote in the 2000 elections, many of these being from the poor and underserved areas of the United States. And, in the past 50 years, the decline in voter turnout in the United States has been said to be embarrassingly low compared to other established democracies around the world (Wheatley and Willis, 2006).

Punishment for lack of participation in discussion and activities should focus on solutions rather than the punishment itself (Nelson, Lott and Glenn, 2000). Teachers can give students choices of what might help them the most. They can also involve students in creating logical consequences and encourage students to utilize principles of effective listening, where students are encouraged to have a reason or purpose in discussion and "use the thinking-speaking differential to reflect and find meaning" (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2006, p. 367). This system works hand-in-hand with democracy and Christian principles, as teachers enable students to have a participative voice in their own outcomes and success.

Critics of the above model and constructivist learning believe that the positive discipline style creates only short term fixes, as the control is aimed mainly at stopping bad behavior rather than creating good citizens. These critics believe that positive discipline lacks the ability to foster the need in children to foster warm, caring relationships as the teacher grabs control of the classroom from the first day and first minute (Wiked, 2006).

What the critics failed to mention is the fact that discipline begins in the home. Through education and the learning process, an individual is able further to develop and understand the need for cooperation and social development. In order for methods of self-discipline to be successful, they must start at a young age. This means that parents must take a vested interest in

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incorporating systems of discipline into parenting styles. Pre-schools and other daycare facilities should also employ this theory, so that students entering the public education system will have already been introduced and accustomed to the method. The system of discipline requires that adult figures spend time in leisure activities with children, sharing important activities while listening and acting as an equal, not as an instructor. Time for church, family prayer and devotion provide balance to discipline system. The value of forgiveness should be on the forefront of the discipline style used in the home. This approach to discipline will increase a child's self-esteem, enabling the child to feel valued, cooperative and able to take initiative to solve problems (Kidsource, 2007).

Due to the fact that respect and social interactions begin in the home, homes and schools must work together to facilitate effectively and efficiently the best type of learning. Even in schools where Christianity cannot be explicitly taught due to the political misinterpertation of separation of church and state, it is possible for Christian values to be implicitly imbedded into curriculum through the instruction of democratic principles. No matter what, classrooms should be a safe environment for students to learn. In order to accomplish the creation of a safe environment, students need to participate in problem solving. Teachers can model methods of decision making where students "choose the alternatives that maximizes the possibility that [they can] attain [their] goals and standards" (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2006, p. 352). The core of the safe environment should be the message of caring and love. Students need to know that their teachers have an active interest in their learning and success. Teachers can demonstrate caring by listening to and taking the children seriously.

It is important to mention that, for many students, the high focus on grading is a form of punishment that should be reconsidered in establishing Christian principles in the classroom via

democratic instruction. Students who do not turn in their work get bad grade. This, in turn, results in students experiencing an increase in frustration and a decrease in interest. Additionally, it results in less work completed. The students who enter this process will ultimately fall behind. As the cycle continues, many students will fail within the system, and many will drop out.

The cycle of grading as a system of punishment could be refined by utilizing Christian perspectives and democratic instruction. Specifically, students can work with teachers to create objectives and standards. In doing this, the concept of formal homework contracts could, in turn, become social contracts.

Increasing democratic instruction in the classroom should result in an increase in student accountability and responsibility. Democracy creates an environment of problem solving, whereas students are accountable for their work no matter what. In doing this, the punishment for not turning in work does not result in a failed grade. Hence, positive discipline implies that any consequences involved will grant students another opportunity to learn and succeed. Sometimes a second chance is all it takes to promote success and increase interest in learning.

A teacher who seeks to overcome the potential negative impacts of the grading system and the institution of formal education can still successfully implement Christian perspectives in the classroom.

In order for democracy to succeed in America, it is essential that citizens of the United States learn to communicate with their elected representatives and understand how to convey an effective message. Thus, the learning environment should provide a means of communication that encourages communication with leadership. There are several styles of communication, and an interested citizen learns how to develop discipline in dealing with those who have different styles. It must be understood that a process for change is time consuming. As a result, citizens

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must demonstrate patience to persevere through the bureaucratic red tape. In doing this, citizens can force the hands of the bureaucracy and government to make a difference (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2006, p. 19). Citizens should instill upon their leaders the need to recognize that every decision made has social and strategic implications.

Motivation should be the center of the student and teacher leadership effort, as those who are enthusiastic and passionate about what they do will achieve more solid results. For example, if a student refuses to work with other students in the classroom, move the student to the front of the room, as this will force the student to become more engaged (Rosevear, 2008). As a result, teachers need to work to build upon and improve levels of communication in order to sustain change (Blazek and Stevens, 2006), and these citizens can best be trained in the constructivist, reflective based classroom setting.

The most effective classroom setting is one that recognizes the spiritual needs of students and that builds upon the natural motivation of students and creates and develops effective, interested citizens. The classroom should be established in a methodical format that promotes democracy. The classroom environment should be such that it allows students to propose initiatives, elect leaders and engage in the planning process.

The education system is potentially in danger of failing to meet the needs of students, as core curriculum begins to take the place of thinking, reasoning and spiritual morality. In order to maintain a high interest environment, a system of positive discipline must be implemented in the classroom; whereas the teacher promotes mutual respect and ingrains in the youth a mentality of social responsibility. The classroom environment should be a safe place that can be counted on to be inviting and encouraging, expecting results and celebrating success.

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