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

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The Need for Redemptive Discipline in the Christian School

Christian Education as a process aims to disciple and equip students to grow spiritually, academically, psychologically, emotionally, and socially. Many believe appropriate classroom management functions as a vital element in creating an environment conducive to the successful fulfillment of this comprehensive development (Olley, et al., 2010). This need for classroom management intensifies particularly as teachers find their jobs increasingly difficult (Stoughton, 2006) due to their significantly limited effectiveness (Bucher & Manning, 2005) and excessive amounts of lost instructional time (Cotton, 1990) caused by inappropriate behavior in the classroom (Nuoffer, 2011). Not only have teachers and administrators identified the prevalence of these issues, but students have as well (Lewis, 2000).

Greater attention to improving discipline in the classroom, therefore, has increased. However, the debate regarding how to facilitate the discipline strategies in the most effective manner remains strong (Zelie, 1980). As a result, formulation of a wide range of personal philosophies of discipline continues, each having practical methods of application (Malmgren, Paul, & Trezek, 2005). Two such philosophies are redemptive and punitive.

Theoretical Framework

Redemptive Discipline

Some Christian schools aim to employ redemptive discipline (Graham, 2003) which takes on a gospel-centered, Scripturally-based, positionally-focused, and grace-oriented nature. In these schools, teachers deal with their students “in the same manner God deals with His people” (p. 265). That means teachers always maintain a position of authority and control; therefore, they not only set, monitor, and enforce rules, but they also have the right to exercise mercy and justice in the administering of those rules (p. 264). However, the goal of redemptive discipline is not for the students to conform behaviorally but rather for the students to be “conformed into the image of Christ” (Romans 8:29, English Standard Version). Rules are defined and communicated, but rules are a means to an end and not an end in and of themselves. Though the students should submit to in authority over them, bringing students to the point of desiring to submit themselves under the authority of God transcends mere outward submission. Achieving this goal involves more than simply regulating behavior; it involves leading students to the point of self-discipline where they can, among other things, recognize, admit and repent of their sin (Tripp, 2001) . As Hanks (1996) has stated, “We must not ignore, excuse, or explain away sin, but as we have learned, so must our [students] learn: the way to deal with sin is through

recognition, confession and repentance” (p. 4). Redemptive discipline aims to produce students who follow the rules, but strict adherence to the rules never overshadows the needs and circumstances of the students. Graham (2003) asserts the same idea when he says, “People determine what will happen to people. Rules do not” (p. 260).

Scripturally-based. Establishing rules that find their basis in Scripture, which is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:15-16, ESV), facilitates this process of redemptive discipline. As many theories and plans assert, teachers must establish rules prior to school beginning and communicate them clearly to students. They must also maintain the rules firmly and fairly (Canter and Canter, 2001). In addition, teachers must ensure that the consequences for positive and negative behavior are both logical and natural (Malmgren, Paul, & Trezek, 2005). However, redemptive discipline diverges from other theories in its aim to produce students who not only take responsibility for their actions but also for their part in the sanctification process that is synergistic as the Spirit convicts through the Word (Priolo, 2000). In this model, the “system” becomes more than simply a way of “coercing or enticing students into acceptable behavior” (Graham, 2003, p. 259).

Positionally-focused. The redemptive discipline model reminds students that their ability to do what is right is dependent upon a regenerate heart and the ministry of the Spirit and the Word (John 3; Galatians 5, ESV). It also reminds them that no matter how hard they try, they will never keep every rule, make every right decision, or become perfect this side of heaven (Romans 7, ESV). Teachers keep before their students the truth that they are sinners by nature but, in Christ, saints by declaration (Ephesians 1:1, et al., ESV) and in the process of becoming what they have already been declared to be in Him. Graham (2003) summarizes this function of the teacher as seeing and “treating students as fallen image bearers” (p. 258). Teachers who only focus on punishment and rewards and students’ lack of compliance with the rules view students as fallen. However, teachers who focus on students’ creativity, potential, and complying with the rules view students as image bearers. Redemptive discipline seeks to bridge the tension between these two views of students and recognizes that they are both fallen and stamped with the image of God.

Grace-oriented. Ultimately, schools that implement redemptive discipline keep the Gospel before each student. Each and every disciplinary situation becomes an opportunity to remind students that their offense serves reminder of their need for a Savior and that Jesus died for their sin (Romans 6:23,

ESV). By establishing and maintaining rules, teachers implementing redemptive discipline continually remind their students of the Gospel. This constant reminding is essential because students' understanding and appreciation for the Gospel will only be as deep or great as their understanding and appreciation for the law. Conversely, their understanding and appreciation for the Law will be proportionate to their understanding and appreciation for the Gospel. In the end, redemptive discipline serves as a means by which teachers disciple their students and teach them that their obedience to the rules is fruit of their salvation and that their obedience is only possible by God's grace.

Punitive Discipline

Most of the approaches or models of classroom management being implemented in schools today, however, focus on changing and managing behavior via punitive, psychologically-based, curriculum-oriented, and behaviorally-focused discipline methods.

Punitive. Skiba (2011) noted that since the early 1990's, many schools have adopted zero tolerance or alternative discipline strategies to thwart the increasing violence taking place on school campuses. The primary methods utilized by these strategies involved removing students with behavioral problems from classrooms to promote a safe learning environment as well as deter future discipline issues; those methods included but were not limited to suspension and expulsion. The author found little evidence to support the notion that these strategies were successful. To the contrary, in some cases, the author actually discovered "correlational evidence" linking zero tolerance policies with increased recidivism rates rather than lower recidivism rates among particular student populations (p. 28).

Psychologically-based. Zelig, Stone, and Lehr (1980) acknowledged that discipline was of vital importance at "every level of education" (p. 80). They concluded that most educators agreed more discipline was needed but disagreed regarding the methods that would meet the challenge most effectively. The authors noted that a common goal of the numerous and differing discipline methods was student self-control. With that in mind, the researchers chose Rational Behavior Therapy, a counseling model that met previously established criteria that had a "psychological basis rather than a disciplinary basis" and emphasized "internal self-control rather than external school control" (p. 80). They believed the therapy, although having never been used as "an alternative to traditional disciplinary procedures," could still fit into classrooms and curriculum without much difficulty (p. 81). The results were positive. They found that the

recidivism rate of those “uncounseled” was three times that of their treatment group who received their chosen form of counseling (p. 82).

Curriculum-oriented. Killion (1998) explored the discipline methods implemented by secondary principals in Indiana that both “decrease student discipline problems and increase student achievement” (p. 44). The researcher contended that discipline problems resulted from “unresolved learning problems” and that discipline should therefore “prevent unacceptable behavior and encourage learning” (p. 45). The initial conclusion included a directive for administrative evaluation that focused upon the overall instructional process due to the fact that “effective” instruction on the part of the teacher and “optimal” learning on the part of the student ultimately leads to fewer discipline problems in the classroom (p. 48). In the end, however, the researcher recommended further research to determine whether a specific correlation exists between effective instruction and lower recidivism rates.

Behaviorally-focused. Bear (2011) asserted most discipline targets student obedience and compliance to authority and, to a lesser degree, student self-discipline. He focused upon the label of “positive” as far as classroom management was concerned and believed the term described any number of discipline practices, but the most common was “the greater use of positive reinforcement than punishment” (p. 8). This reinforcement, however, was found to produce compliance and the simple avoidance of punishment or earning of rewards. He determined that lower recidivism rates would result not from compliance but from new attitudes and motivations arising from new “values, standards, and beliefs” (p. 8) as well as the learned ability to make right and wrong choices based upon a knowledge of “why behaviors are right and wrong” (p. 8).

Literature Review

Positive Elements

These particular examples represent a wealth of literature that includes positive elements that transcend any one particular plan or learning environment. The literature suggests establishing a discipline theory and plan of implementation, and that the plan should be communicating it to students early and clearly (Canter and Canter, 2001). Each plan should also seek to establish firm and fair rules of conduct with logical and natural positive reinforcement for positive behavior as well as logical and natural negative consequences for wrong behavior (Malmgren, Paul, & Trezek, 2005).

Negative Elements

When evaluating the literature from a biblical perspective, however, three negative elements become evident. First, the overwhelming majority of literature reviewed denied the depravity of man. In the literature reviewed, most research contained an underlying assumption that man is inherently good and that under certain conditions or with appropriate discipline and training, students can and will do what is right and good (Hanko, 1996). However, the doctrine of total depravity states that everyone is born with not only the inability but also an unwillingness to do what God desires because “No one is righteous (good), no not one.” (Romans 3:10, ESV). The failure to acknowledge and/or the denial of this foundational doctrine has a direct impact on the goals teachers set, the expectations they have, and the methods they implement (1996). Teachers believe students can and will respond positively to discipline, and they expect students to eventually desire to respond positively to discipline. While rules may set boundaries and identify right behavior, the rules do not produce the desire within the heart of the student to obey (Romans 7:5, ESV).

Second, the overwhelming majority of literature reviewed ultimately targeted external behavior and obedience regardless of whether the behavior was imposed by the teacher or chosen by the student. Unfortunately, when the external is emphasized to the exclusion of the internal, the approaches have “limited value” (Bear, Doyle, Osher, & Sprague, 2010, p. 10) because the results are short-term and short-lived when the attitudes and motivations aren’t targeted as well.

Finally, the literature reviewed ultimately revealed the “person-centeredness” (Freiberg & Lamb, 2009, p. 100) of most if not all approaches in which students are directed within themselves to determine what is right and what is wrong. This thinking results in the feeding of what is already an idolatrous heart and undermines the submission to biblical authority as constituted by God (Romans 13:1-5; Ephesians 6:1-3; Colossians 3:20; I Peter 2:13-18, ESV).

Research Purposes

The vast differences between these two philosophies and their particular methods of implementation indicate probable differences in outcomes produced. The consequent question is, “To what extent are recidivism rates of high school students affected by the types of disciplinary methods implemented?” This author believes there is a high probability that a significant statistical difference exists between the mean recidivism rate of high school students who are disciplined redemptively and the mean recidivism rate of high schools students who are disciplined punitively. This author also believes the preponderance of literature supports future qualitative and quantitative research to prove whether or not this hypothesis is in fact true.

Conclusion

What is taking place in most schools today regarding discipline is an effort to control and coerce behavior for the sake of safety and learning. Unfortunately, the focus is on punishing past behavior rather than changing future behavior (Curwin & Mendler, 1996). But a system built simply on punishing bad behavior and rewarding good behavior produces “defiant” students (p. 12) not compliant ones because the law “arouses” our sin (Romans 7:5, ESV). Grace, not the law, changes the heart. The do’s and don’ts of the law elicit rebelliousness and licentiousness. Grace, however, produces gratitude and a desire to do what is right in response to what Christ has already done on our behalf. Certainly, rules are to be established, maintained and followed because the Lord disciplines those He loves as a Father disciplines His child (Hebrews 12:6, ESV). However, the Lord disciplines with and through an attitude of grace, forgiveness, and restoration, not condemnation. Therefore, the Christian school should strive to discipline in the same manner “of the Lord” (Ephesian 6:4, ESV) - redemptively not punitively. In the following quote, Graham (2003) encapsulates not only the definition and advantage of redemptive discipline but also the deficiency of punitive discipline:

“A living example is perhaps not so much a person who does everything the way it is supposed to be done as a person who, out of gratitude to God, wants to do what is right but falls short and rests in the righteousness of Christ. That is grace. That is the gospel. That is redemption. Where do we find it demonstrated in approaches to discipline that are designed to control students and to force their compliance with righteous expectations? We do not find it because we cannot.” (p. 271)

Resources

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