School Culture and the Moral Development of Children

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Abstract. Children do not develop in isolation. Their interactions with family, home, school, community and society play important role in their moral development. Children spend an incredible amount of time in school. School has a great impact on students' moral development. School culture is the unwritten rules and assumptions, the combination of rituals and traditions, the array of symbols and artifacts, the language that is of the population of the school. children develop confidence and a more positive attitude in a positive school culture. In contrast, in a toxic school culture, children start to develop negative behavioral traits.

Keywords: School Culture, Moral Development, Children.

1. Introduction

"A child effects as well is affected by the settings in which she spends time."(Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Family is the most important setting for children. There, they spend the most time and they form their most emotional bonds. Children's primary relationships need to be with those who can love them fully from the heart and provide a sense of long-lasting care. The most destructive force to a child's development is when the interactions between child and parents and other important adults are few and far between or when the family life is not stable and not predictable.

When children grow up, their interactions grow. Schools and teachers fulfill vital secondary roles. The primary adults are parents and other important adults in the family who can provide them with complex and deep interactions that stay forever. However, support from secondary adults is also vital to positive development. Schools and teachers must support the primary relationships by creating an environment that welcomes and nurtures families. Parents, teachers, extended family, work, supervisors and legislators can raise children together by fostering societal attitudes. Our children will be profound if we work in harmony, hand-in-hand; and provide them with a community that cares and supports one another.

2. School Culture Defined

2.1. Definition of School Culture

The concept of school culture is not new. One of the first authors who discussed school culture was Willard Waller, a sociologist, in 1932. In his book *The Sociology of Teaching*, he wrote 'every school has a culture of its own, with set rituals and folkways and a moral code (cultural values) that shape behavior and relationships'. School culture is so close to us, yet it is not easy to define because it is ingrained in the organization – we can even say that it is the organization itself. Freiberg (1998) described school culture as being similar to the air we breathe. No one notices it unless it becomes polluted.

Maybe you cannot describe what school culture is in words, but you can feel it when you enter a school. If you have attended several schools, you can instantly acknowledge the culture of the school you have just entered; the positive and negative vibes, the interaction, unwritten rules and unstated expectations; something more than just procedures and rules. You can feel how the school identifies with democracy, humanity, unity, religiosity, and social justice as their norms and traditions. You can observe whether the decision-making

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process is democratic or not, the school members are united or divided into groups based on religion or social class, are whether they support each other. You glimpse hints of positive or negative school culture there. You may glimpse these hints in the cafeteria; do the children form a queue at the cashier, or not; do the students sit in mixed groups, or not; how teachers interact with students there; whether the students put their chairs back in the correct place after eating, or not, and many other clues.

There are various definitions of school culture in literature. Many educators mistakenly identify school culture as school climate. Peterson & Deal (2002) clearly differentiated these two terms: **climate stresses the** feeling and current tone of the school, the feeling of the relationships, and the morale of the place; and *culture* best represents complex elements of values, traditions, language and purpose. Peterson & Deal emphasized that culture exists in the deeper elements of a school. It is the unwritten rules and assumptions, the combination of rituals and traditions, the array of symbols and artifacts, the language that is of the population of the school. Every school has written rules and procedures, but school culture (the unwritten and unstated rules and procedures) often affects person-to-person interaction more because people consciously realize it and act accordingly. The culture is a very powerful part of what happens at school.

Richardson (2001) defined school culture as the accumulation of many individuals' values and norms. It is the agreement about what is vital and what the expectations are. According to him, it is not only one individual who creates culture, it is communal. The culture is shared beliefs, customs and behaviour. It is continuously created and moulded through interpersonal and social interactions and through reflections of people within and beyond the culture. School culture is not static, it is very dynamic.

2.2. Types of School Culture

Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) discussed two types of school culture: individualistic and collaborative. The individualistic culture is formed after years of teaching in isolation and having a school full of teachers who are professionally estranged from one another. This culture of individualism sustains conservative views and usually opposes change and innovation. The collaborative culture considers that teaching is inherently not easy and good teachers never stop learning to teach. This culture believes in change and innovations. Giving and receiving help is seen as positive.

Peterson and Deals (2002) differentiated two types of school culture: Positive and Toxic school culture. A school with a positive culture is a place where physical comfort levels are at the highest; where students and teachers like to be. There is a sense of positivity and hopefulness. In their earlier book, Peterson & Deal (1998) listed the description of positive school culture as: where the teachers pour their heart into teaching; where the underlying norms are of collegiality, improvement, and hard work; where rituals and traditions celebrate student accomplishment, teacher innovation, and parental commitment; where the informal network provides a web of information, support and history; and where success, joy and humor abound. In a toxic culture, in contrast, you find almost a sense of depression and frustration in the school. The school is not united. The school members really don't believe that they can improve what they do. They don't believe they can make changes and bring the school up to a higher level. They blame students for not learning and they blame the community for not having better students. They don't celebrate success often. The traditions that reinforce the positive and supportive aspects of the school are limited.

2.3. The Development of School Culture

Many aspects influence school culture. The combination of characteristics; from staff personalities to the principal's leadership, comprise school culture. The society's cultural values affect school culture. The community where the school is located also has a significant influence. The family background of the students may affect school culture. There are many elements that affect school culture.

In many cases, leaders can have a dominant influence on promising cultural patterns. Cunningham and Gresso (1993) dedicated their book entirely to the recognition of school culture and the impact school leaders have on the culture. They defined school culture as those that accomplished achievements through a

collective vision. Sergiovanni (1984) stated that all schools have cultures whether it is strong or weak, functional or dysfunctional. He added Successful schools seem to have strong and functional cultures aligned with a vision of the leaders. School leaders should share a clear, articulated vision, a vision that embodies core values and purposes to successfully shape positive school culture.

3. The Effects of School Culture on Moral Development

Parents are the primary adults in children's lives. They provide children with emotional and physical bonds. They are the main role models who influence children's physical, social, mental, spiritual and moral development. When children are two to four years old many are sent to pre-school. Children start their formal education in kindergarten when they are 4-6 years old.

Children spend an incredible amount of time in school. School and school culture have a great impact on students' moral development. According to Shumaker and Heckel (2007), most children are more receptive to the information imparted upon them by teachers (compared with parents) because not only is there a clear authority behind the information and often clear consequences for failing to learn, but also the student is in a more active learning mode than when they are at home or in other contexts. In a positive school culture children feel comfortable at school, feel safe to talk to their teachers when they face problems, feel appreciated, or being involved in decision-making at school, they will have greater confidence and a more positive attitude. The way they feel toward peers, teachers, staff and leaders at school will affect their moral life. In contrast, in a toxic school culture, students become depressed and frustrated. They are afraid to move forward and change. They feel guilty because teachers blame them if they fail. They start to develop negative behavioral traits.

The relationships children develop in schools become critical to their positive development (Skinner, 1964). Teachers may be the first adults outside of parents that children encounter. The interactions with teachers carry real weight. Teacher-student connections help students develop cognitive, social, emotional and moral skills. The family (especially the parents) are the closest, most influential, most long-lasting fixtures in a child's environment. Family influences almost all aspects of a child's development: language, health, social and beliefs. All are developed through contributions and behavior related to feedback within the family. The students will bring the culture of their family into school. Teachers need to deal with a great variety of family culture to understand how the children learn and develop. Nowadays, family systems are changing. In the past, family systems were quite identical; family was the combination of a stay-at-home mother, a working father and siblings. Single parent families are common now. There are now families that consist of a working mother, a working father, and step siblings; families consisting of a working mother, a stay-at-home father, and siblings; two mothers and a monogamous father, and step siblings; single mother or father; and other combinations. The combinations of the family itself will affect the behavior of the child. The school is also affected by the combinations of the family. Where does the report card go? Who comes to parent-teacher conferences? When there is a breakdown in the family, the school needs to play a greater role in a child's development to ensure the child's emotional, physical and social needs are fulfilled. Schools and teachers should work to support the primary relationship and to create an environment that welcomes and nurtures the family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Realizing the changes of a family system in modern life, acknowledging the breakdowns that occur in some family-children relationships, it seems that it is important for schools and teachers to also provide support for stable, long-term relationships between students and parents, and also between students and teachers. Schools and teachers need to work together with society to create welcoming and nurturing environment that is essential in fostering children physical, emotional, social and moral development.

4. Final Thoughts

Positive school cultures do not appear by chance. It requires a process that takes time for those who work in and study in schools, and the formal and informal leaders who encourage and reinforce values and traditions. Schools need support from teachers, leaders, staff and students to develop a positive culture. School culture is an underground river of feelings, folkways, norms and values that influence how the school members view life (Peterson & Deal, 1999). It shapes how they interpret the hundreds of daily interactions and provides meaning and purpose to their interactions, activities and work (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

School culture influence the way of school community think, feel and act. The unwritten rules and categories of school culture could have a stronger effect than written regulations. The ambiance, atmosphere, feeling and interaction in school intertwine with and affect the minds and behavior of its members. Culture is a prevailing web of rituals and traditions, norms and values that affect every aspect of school life. School culture affects people's focus, commitment, motivation and productivity (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

Culture increases motivation. In a school where accomplishment is highly regarded and appreciated, teachers, staff and students will feel more motivated to work and study hard, and to make changes. Whereas at schools with an unclear sense of purpose, the members will lack inspiration, and will not have the motivation to work and study hard. When they feel accepted and secured they will be less aggressive and abusive. They celebrate peace and harmony. They will voluntarily contribute and maintain peace at their home, school and community because they love their environment.

A school culture sharpens the focus of daily behavior and increases attention to what is important and valued (Peterson and Deal, 2002). For example, in a school where the underlying norms and values reinforce sports, the school will focus on that. In a kindergarten where the focus is winning dance competition, they will spend money on facilities that support them in achieving that goal. As suggested, schools could print their vision on banners and hang the banners in a central point in the school, to remind and encourage students, teachers and administrators to embrace the vision.

Besides affecting moral development, school culture also boosts a school's effectiveness and productivity. Teachers and students are more likely to succeed in a culture that fosters hard work, commitment to goals, and attention to problem solving, and a focus on learning for all students (Peterson & Deal, 2002). In a school with a strong professional culture, the staff share strong norms of collegiality and improvement, value student-learning over personal ease, and assume all children can learn if teachers and staff work together to find strategies that are suitable and applicable. A positive culture fosters productivity. In a school with a toxic culture, the staff, teachers and students have fragmented purposes, and a low commitment and almost no motivation for improvement.

There are activities that can positively strengthen a school's culture in kindergarten, such as: sharing stories of a community's good examples for children so that they learn to honour as well as embrace good moral behaviour; conducting meaningful service learning activities for students, such as cleaning the neighbourhood or decorating dust bins; building close relationships among school, home and students, encourage parents to get involved at school, and encourage students to get involved in the community; remembering small things such as to say sorry when one makes a mistake, putting the toys back where they belong; and showing that you care, are eager to correct others in a proper way, and do not blame others. These little things will make a big different, and result in a giant step for moral development.

5. Acknowledgements

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