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**The way to a caring school environment**

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Every social system has a unique culture, and its nature can have a profound influence on its members. In the same way, no two schools are alike - indeed no two classrooms have the same atmosphere. Sadly, there are some schools - or classrooms - that darken the spirits of those in them, and profoundly affect students' and teachers' innate love of learning.

Equally, there are schools that inspire children and teachers to retain their natural curiosity, eagerness and love of learning, and have a positive influence on children that stays with them for their whole lives.

Any social system has a duty to ensure that its members are cherished, challenged and fairly treated. In this regard, school principals and school managers are responsible for developing a caring school system that promotes the welfare of all its members.

However, leaders cannot accomplish this task without the responsible and respectful co-operation of the other members of the school. It would be wise for managers, principals and teachers to consider parents as major contributors to the culture of a school. Any marginalising of parents can be detrimental to the school's culture.

In every school the individual presence of each person and the collective presence of all the members are important. School cultures, like all cultures, are difficult to define. They are not easily discerned - what you see is not always what it is all about. A work culture, for example, is made up of the symbols, language, assumptions, traditions and behaviours that overtly show the workplace's standards and values. These are taught to new entrants as the "right" way to think, to feel and to act.

One of the major difficulties with defining a school culture is that each classroom can also be a culture unto itself. It may not always reflect the pattern of the wider school culture.

In a situation where a school culture diminishes the presence of its members, an individual teacher's classroom can sometimes be an oasis in the desert. However, where the contrary occurs, confusion and frustration can reign and students, in particular, can become distressed because of the lack of consistency in caring, respect and clear, fair boundaries. Other teachers can also become resentful of this negative influence. To date, strong measures have not tended to be employed to bring about harmony in a school culture. This is neglectful, not only of those in distress, but also of the teachers who are the source of the distress.

One also wonders what children think of adult values when, day in and day out, they are exposed to behaviours that seriously lessen their value in the classroom.

Parents have told me of teachers who are critical, sarcastic and cynical, who shout and roar, and of children who dread going to school. Sometimes these parents defend their non-confrontation of the untenable situation by claiming "the child will have a lovely teacher next year". Sadly by then, the child's fear of school, teachers and learning may have become a solid defence against being in school at all.

It is equally true to say that no teacher should have to face into a classroom where every day either an individual student or a group of students are disruptive, aggressive, uncooperative, or sometimes violent. There is something radically wrong with a school culture - and the wider culture - when these behaviours go unchallenged. Whether we like it or not, each one of us are in some way responsible when any member of a social system is negligent or neglected.

While each school culture is a unique phenomenon, there are certain fundamental aspects to "all-caring" school cultures:

* person-centred (rather than programme-centred);
* relationships seen as a priority;
* learning and teaching known to be directly related to how students and teachers view "self";
* presence and absence of each school member matters;
* discipline system for all (not just students);
* group decision-making;
* emphasis on educational effort rather than academic performance;
* mistakes and failures seen as opportunities for learning (not criticism);
* success and failure viewed as relative terms;
* belief in each member's unique giftedness and limitless potential;
* intelligence and knowledge seen as separate issues;
* learning has only positive associations;
* listening to the needs of all members;
* back-up support system to deal with neglect of any member;
* openness to change;
* freedom to be different;
* management style that is transformational in nature;

The above list is by no means exhaustive, but implementation of these recommendations would go a long way to creating a school environment that reaches out with heart and mind to all its members.

***Dr Tony Humphreys is a consultant clinical psychologist and author of A Different Kind of Discipline***