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Revealing Jesus in the Learning Environment: Evidence & Impact

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Chapter Eight

Reflections of Community in the Learning Environment

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Abstract

This chapter explores the concept of community and its relevance in understanding the character of authentic Christian schools. The discussion grows out of the perspective of Christian education's distinctive character as presented in the previous edition of *Revealing Jesus in the Learning Environment: Making a World of Difference* (Roy, 2020, chap. 1).

It is not uncommon to associate schools of any kind with the concept of community. In the Christian school sector in particular over the last two decades, some Christian schools have begun identifying themselves as “communities of faith.” This chapter regards such a practice as a valid description of authentic Christian schools. However, the view is taken that this should not be done casually or without thoughtful consideration. At first glance, connotations of faith would imply a school's representation of Christian faith, or even religious denominational identity. But it is much deeper than that. It depends on what is meant by “faith” in this context. It must be something more than a mere label. This chapter seeks to explore the meanings and significance of some of these terms in such a context. It also seeks to reinstate human presence that is thoughtful, intentional, and dynamic. The chapter features three anecdotes that exemplify the character of

schools as communities of faith, and in so doing, posits principles and criteria to guide the strategic response of Christian schools and systems, and ensure the creation of conditions likely to facilitate the realisation of community.

* * * * *

Becky's Story

To set the stage, let me tell you a story of what happened to a small girl called Becky. At the time of the event, Becky was attending an Adventist school in one of Australia's capital cities. She was just 6 years of age. One afternoon after arriving home from school, she returned to the car to retrieve her schoolbag that she had left behind. Her mother, who was feeding the baby at the time, became anxious when Becky didn't return. On checking, she was confronted by a horrifying spectacle on the front steps. A Rottweiler on the loose had attacked Becky, knocking her to the ground, savaging her back, and laying it open in several places. She was rushed to the emergency department at the hospital.

While Becky's wounds were being attended to, the medical team was amazed at her relative composure. Strangely, the trauma and shock appeared to be less than expected. Then, as they worked, they became aware of quiet humming, then made out some words. As they paused and bent to listen, they heard the small girl quietly singing,

My God is so big,
So strong and so mighty,
There's nothing my God cannot do!

Amazed, and deeply moved, one of the nurses asked, "Where did you learn that song?"

'We sing it every day at school,' Becky answered. 'Our teacher taught us.'" That event, and the little girl's testimony of faith had a profound effect that rippled out to family, medical staff, school, and community.

Since that event, I have often reflected on what had transpired, trying to fit together all the bits and pieces of the story and what it says about Christian education. The event was obviously unanticipated and the outcomes spontaneous. Why did Becky respond as she did?

Colloquially speaking, she “had it all together.” So did her teacher and her school. Obviously, there was nothing in the school curriculum specifically focusing on the possibility of the children being exposed to dog attacks! But there was an integrity and cohesiveness that characterised the lives of everyone connected with the school and its operation. On occasions when I visited that school as part of my role as a director in the system in which the school belonged, I always made a point of paying a visit to that classroom, especially for morning worship. The sense of joy and togetherness was infectious as the children interacted with the teacher like a finely tuned orchestra. Reflecting on Becky’s experience helped me appreciate what had undoubtedly been factors in the outcomes. And this atmosphere was not isolated to Becky’s classroom alone. The whole school resonated with a quality that sometimes drew comments of appreciation from parents about the sense of peace and calmness they felt when walking onto the campus.

Becky’s school exemplifies what I would describe as “community.” It is a school in which everything – the vision, mission, and goals of the school, are lived out in classrooms, the playground, and in the lives of the teachers. The intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and social realms come together in synergy. The school community helps its members to make meaningful connections and to enjoy sensitive relationships that hold everything together, particularly in times when it really counts.

“Community” – it sounds appropriate to describe a Christian school in this way, both in terms of its identity and purpose. There is no denying that we live in a disconnected world where individuals suffer personal, emotional, and relational dislocation. The fact that the term “community” is used so widely is symptomatic of its absence and our deep longing for it. The sociologist Peter Berger attributes modern humanity’s problems, including alienation, fragmentation, a sense of “homelessness” and the decline of community to the loss of the sense of “the transcendent” (Berger, 1974). It leaves what in Augustine’s terms is “a God-shaped vacuum” experienced both personally and corporately. From a Christian perspective, this crisis of community is an inevitable outcome of humanity’s Fall in Eden. It also offers a reason for the individualism of contemporary society.

The Role of Education

Hargreaves (1997) acknowledges that “across much of the developed world, people are experiencing a crisis of community” and asserts that “schools provide one of our last and greatest hopes for resolving it” (p. 4). In a similar vein, Palmer (1993) holds the view that education has a distinctive role to play. The school’s primary purpose is “the restoration of connectedness” that will be manifested in a renewed sense of community. He argues that “at the frontiers of intellectual life, scholars now regard the concept of community as indispensable.” For this reason, “the recovery of community [is] indispensable in describing the terrain educators inhabit” (pp. xii, xiii).

Re-Imagining Community

In their extensive survey of the use of the term “community” and its derivatives, Studdert & Walkerdine (2016) are justified in their criticism of the ubiquitous, and often shallow and confusing use of the term. There is no disputing the pervasive, presence and emotive power of the word itself, with its manifold meanings, uses and connotations. However, that should not discourage further critique and the potential for a better understanding and a fresh conceptualisation of the term. Towards that end, it is relevant to ask several questions: what does community mean in essence, what are the implications for education generally, and what can educators do to facilitate its development?

First, community may simply represent a group of people united for a shared purpose and goals based on the commonality of norms, customs, and beliefs, thus, *a* community. In some contexts, community is linked to other qualifiers that indicate location such as urban or rural communities, religious, political, or cultural identity such as Christian or indigenous communities, or virtual space such as online communities. Over time, such communities develop a distinct culture comprising beliefs, values and *mores* that are lived out in customs, practices, social arrangements, and relationships. Interaction within such a group may produce a state of community with a sense of identity, solidarity, and well-being. The latter use of the term has more dynamic, holistic, and personal nuances, and for this reason, here I will focus on the sense of community as an interpersonal network that supports individual and collective well-being on all levels, in order to

gain a deeper insight into the meaning of the concept. To this end, the following principles are posited:

- Community is seen as a dynamic rather than a static, structured entity. In other words, it represents a conscious refocusing away from community seen as an object (an objective view) to a sense of community (a subjective view). Consequently, community is not seen as a structural ideal or type into which a particular collective is expected to fit, but rather an evolving process towards a product that is discernible at any point of time growing from a network of causal factors.
- Thus, community is emergent. This term is borrowed from a critical realist perspective of what it means to exist. Community is manifested in recognisable events growing out of antecedent social interaction and cultural conditions.
- In the context of community, individuals are progressively enculturated in the beliefs, values and *mores* that are represented in customs and patterns of social organisation and relationships.
- Thus, community is a product of the dialectic interplay between social structure and human agency in which both are in tension, yet distinct, without either being obscured or eclipsed by the other.

I want to re-emphasise – community is subjective and experiential. Regarding community merely as a group of individuals with common interests (i.e., community viewed objectively), fails to appreciate the richness and dynamics of the interpersonal interplay that give communities their distinctive character and identity. In that sociocultural milieu, socialisation is not deterministic or oppressive; at the same time, while being open and free, neither is it voluntaristic. Smith's definition of personhood (2010), although by his own admission, wordy, captures the rich, dynamic character and relationship between the community and its members. He states:

By person I mean a conscious, reflexive, embodied, bodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication who as the efficient cause of his or her own responsible actions and interactions-exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to develop and sustain his or her own incommunicable self

in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the nonpersonal world. (Smith, 2010, p. 61)

This view of personhood clearly represents humans as reflective, responsive, purposeful, and active agents. On this basis, Smith goes on to portray humans as “centers with purpose,” each being “a new and unique center of subjective experience” that “integrates, coordinates, and directs those capacities in new, purposeful ways” (2010, p. 79).

Biblical Insights

The concepts of personhood, culture and community are also firmly grounded in, and align with Scripture, being represented in a cluster of sympathetic words and terms. Consideration of them is important to ensure the validity of relative theorizing on Christian education (Roy, 2020, pp. 26–28).

Firstly, in relation to *personhood*, there is a strong correlation between the mystery of *imago Dei* as introduced in Genesis chapter 1 and the expanded dimensions of human personhood according to Smith (2010). It is not assumed that Smith was intending to make any overt connections. Nevertheless, I would argue that an intrinsic complementarity is strongly evident. Early in the 20th century, George Campbell Morgan (1903) in his seminal treatise also defined *imago Dei* as reflecting the human capacity for intelligence, emotion and will. Elsewhere (Roy, 2020, pp. 23–25), I have argued for the necessity of a Christ-centred orientation in understanding human personhood. Furthermore, it is also argued that although in its introduction in Genesis, *imago Dei* may be relatively obscure, the biblical metanarrative that follows does expand on the meaning of the expression by providing insights into human nature, its character, and its function in the context of God and His relationship with humanity.

Secondly, Bible scholars recognise a facet of *imago Dei* in what is described as the cultural mandate (*New King James Version* [NKJV], 1982, Genesis 1:20–2:3). Clearly, it was not the Creator’s intention for humans to live alone. True personhood is grounded in relationship that is conducive to flourishing in every human dimension. However, flourishing in this sense has nothing to do with selfish material gain. Implicitly, it has to do with enriched sociality, relationships, security, and well-being. Commentary on what it means for humans to be created

in the image of God should recognise the social, relational significance of the cultural mandate bestowed on Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:20–2:3). Discussion of human nature often focuses on the intellectual, spiritual, moral, decision-making, creative, and relational aspects of humanity. However, the significance of humans as cultural beings is often overlooked. Simply producing a list of attributes depersonalises human nature by reducing it to a static representation. In contrast, invoking the notion of culture provides a conceptual frame that brings all such dimensions of personhood into a dynamic wholeness. From that perspective, humans are viewed as culture makers, and meeting that challenge is our mandate. Personhood is embedded in the culture, ethos, and environmental setting in which individuals find themselves. The beliefs, language, shared meanings, understandings, and expressions, both tangible and invisible or symbolic, are embodied and expressed in the institutions, rituals, practices, objects, values and *mores* of the community. It is through culture that an individual becomes socialised, thus providing meaning for their existence and personal identity, or “lifeworld” (Sergiovani, 2000, pp. 4–5). In this milieu, enculturation seeks not only the construction of individual and social identity, but ultimately, cultural continuity.

In the New Testament, Gk. *ekklesia*, from which the word “church” is derived, is prominent. Here, the sense is “an assembled group” which roughly equates to a community. This is also regarded as equivalent in the Old Testament Hebrew *’êdâh*.

a) *Edah* is related to the word *ed*, meaning “witness.” Hence an *edah* is a group or community of people that “bears witness.” (Sinclair, 2008). However, in the New Testament there are indications of an updated usage. In Luke’s account of events associated with Pentecost (Acts 2) the assembled group of believers, while not yet a formal *ekklesia*, certainly had an identity that spoke of their allegiance to Jesus. (Acts 2:42) describes how “they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” In this account, the word “fellowship” is significant. The Greek word is *koinōnia* – in nominative form. Interestingly, it occurs again in adjectival form as *koina* in verse 44. In each case it testifies both to things commonly shared as well as a shared harmony motivated by love. However, through continued usage, *koinonia* came to be known as “the fellowship.” This, together with Paul’s metaphor where he compares *ekklesia* to “a body”, is richly meaningful.

Based on the work of Robert Banks (1979) in his *Paul's Idea of Community*, scholar and educator William Andersen (1984) developed a theoretical model of the Christian church as a community. However, what we are considering is more than just “a community” as a sociological phenomenon. Andersen argues that the New Testament church, or *ekklesia*, fits this profile. In particular:

- each *ekklesia* was diverse racially, culturally and socially, and was of a size to facilitate close personal relationships;
- their core notion was up-building or edification towards both individual and corporate maturity;
- this shared goal was underpinned by the core value of *agape*, motivated by the example of Jesus in His life and ministry, the reality of His resurrection, and the manifestation of His continuing presence in the person of the Holy Spirit;
- community matured through the exercise of spiritual gifts on the part of its members and attending to the welfare of other members of the community;
- this maintenance of psychosocial well-being provided a sense of personal identity, security and communal solidarity or “unity in diversity”;
- community was enhanced and strengthened through stress and persecution;
- the sense of community generated was termed *koinonia*. However, it became so distinctive that such groups were known as *koinonia* in the same way we speak of a fellowship.

But Andersen takes the argument a step further. He argues that the Christian school should be recognised as a complementary ministry of the larger church, sharing the same ultimate goal – the restoration of wholeness, or, as often stated, “the restoration of the image of God in man.”

There is strong resonance between this theoretical view of community and how it throws light on the story of Becky and her encounter with the dog. Many questions remain as to how and why the story unfolded as it did. It is also possible to trace many connections between the theoretical survey and the event. Here are some observations:

- Becky's school, as a social structure, provided the setting from which nuanced qualities and characteristic became enlivened and recognisable when the circumstances were right (critical realists describe this as becoming "actualised.")
- School was a happy place with a warm ambience, security, and love.
- The actual event provided the context for the enacted drama. Of the players in the drama, Becky's teacher stood out – not as an authority figure, but as a sensitive human being who had earned Becky's trust.
- The event reflected a transcendent orientation and ambience. God is not someone to be feared, but one to whom Becky was attracted and responded instinctively. Becky had been taught to see God as the immediate and trustworthy source of help for every situation.
- Becky's reply highlighted a contributing factor in the unfolding events. "Our teacher taught us." There is no hint of indoctrination; rather, the teacher as a mediator in reflecting the Divine. She had represented Divinity in appealing terms; as a God of love.
- Although Becky was very young, her faith was mature for her stage of development.

There are also other questions like – what does the story indicate about other aspects of the school: its participating and contributing members, its principal, and so on? But in short, and in view of the event and what it says about the school, I would argue that the school in its totality represented a community of faith.

Please allow me to share another story – this time, in a secondary school setting.

Simon's Story

As I stepped out of my office one afternoon at the school where I served, I glanced towards the main entrance gate some distance away and caught sight of two Year 11 students, Simon and Justin, strolling suspiciously through the front gate. When they were summoned back,

the guilty expressions on their faces showed plainly that they knew they were in trouble! When asked the reason for their attempted retreat, they claimed their parents had given them permission to leave school early for some reason. Back in my office, I asked Simon, obviously the leader, to call his parents and let me to speak to them. After going through the charade for a short time, he pretended his parents weren't answering, but with the pressure of guilt mounting, Simon finally blurted out, "I give up! We were actually nicking out to go to the pictures!" After a brief pause taking in the situation, Simon slung his bag over his shoulder and started towards the door with Justin close behind. "We might as well go home," they said to one another, "because we are obviously expelled!"

There was good reason for Simon's assessment of the situation. Previously, at a school campout at the end of Year 10, these two lads, along with a group of their peers, had engaged in some serious misbehaviour on the beach after the two staff supervisors had fallen asleep. But news of the event only surfaced by accident some days later when collective guilt proved greater than some students could withstand! Even then, and for some time, several of the ring leaders blatantly denied the allegations. However, the truth finally came out. After protracted discussion, it was decided that all the students involved would only be enrolled provisionally in the senior school the following year. They were on probation, and any further infringements would lead to automatic suspension. In Simon's opinion, he and his friend had crossed that line.

As they began to leave, I called them back. Something troubled me. I was aware of some circumstances affecting the family at home and felt that applying the letter of the law would have a devastating effect. So, it was agreed that the situation would be considered overnight pending a decision next day after consultation with the parents.

Next morning the boys waited sheepishly at the office for the verdict. In the conversation that followed, the boys were offered the chance to commit to a new "signed contract" in which they would receive one final chance. They were speechless, but the agreement was confirmed. Fortunately, the episode ended on a positive note, and the students' behaviour was impeccable for the remainder of their enrolment at the school. But what was especially meaningful was a letter Simon sent me the next day. It read:

Dear Sir,

Just a small note to apologise for our actions and to thank you for the grace extended to me by you. I think it's the first time in my school career that a teacher has done such a thing that was totally undeserved. I think it has helped me to understand the word "grace" and "justified" from the studies that we have done in Romans more than before. I have seen it in action. I can now see better than before the benefits of Christian teachers and a Christian education. Maybe just a small reflection but it has given me a lot to think about!

Thanks, From Simon

I hasten to add that I feel rather self-conscious in telling this story, because not all my encounters with students such as this have been as positive. But thankfully, on this occasion, "all things worked together for good" (Romans 8:28). In looking back, it appears "the penny had dropped" for Simon and in the context of real life, what had been theoretical knowledge had become immensely meaningful and transcendent. In that moment, the school had functioned as a community of faith. But this also begs the question, what does "faith" mean in this context?

Depicting any Christian school as "a community of faith" is not something that should be done thoughtlessly. In the case of this chapter, it is intentional. At first glance, connotations of faith would imply the school's representation of Christian faith, or even religious denominational identity. But I would argue it is much deeper than that. It depends on what is meant by "faith" in this context. It must be something more than a mere categorical label. Faith is complex. But in concise terms, it represents a sense of personal meaning, life orientation or worldview (Roy, 2000). By nature, its facets represent distinct *cognitive*, *affective* and *active* dimensions:

- *Believing* – with respect to one's understanding and sense of the supernatural as reflected in beliefs, imagination, principles, connections and patterns, and developing world view.
- *Worship* – reflecting a relationship of trust and commitment to the supernatural God as reflected in life focus, inclination to God, emotional disposition, conviction, willingness, and commitment.

- *Action* – ethical and moral behavior, and interpersonal relationships as reflected in selfless disposition, sympathy, empathy, generosity, and love.

(Roy, 2000, pp. 2–3)

Whichever dimension one considers, there is a clear orientation and relational quality present. It links humans with the supernatural, with other humans, and with the created world. It is more than mere mental assent. There is a practical outgrowth reflecting personal maturation. The spirit of relationship is also conducive to *group* cohesiveness growing out of unselfish, unconditional love (*agape*), and group sensitivity (*koinonia*). The *body of Christ* metaphor captures the essence of community. Such faith is dynamic. It grows continually. Obviously, small children perceive God, the world, and others differently from older children, adolescents and adults. Throughout life, individuals develop through definitive stages of maturation. As a definitive statement though, two main points can be made. First, faith represents personal meaning-making resulting from one's response to the world, and second, people are active agents in that process. Faith grows (i.e., is learned) by the active exploration and sharing of biblical reality between the learner and his or her mentors – be they teachers, parents or other significant individuals. This view has critical implications for how mentors relate to students, as well as the learning processes they use to help the learner develop a personal sense of meaning. There is no room in this perspective for a passive individual.

These ideas are not new in essence. Fowler (1981), for instance, speaks of the development of personal “master stories” as part of one's faith. These master stories are at the heart of paradigms that inform and drive the development of personal integrity of character, meaning and effectiveness. Huebner has a similar view of how individuals create a “fabric of life” comprising an interweaving of ideas, abstractions, memories, biblical metaphors, and cultural *mores* derived from the faith community and the relationships within it. Huebner argues that life in the intimacy and context of those relationships affirms a personal and a collective past that in turn, acknowledges, practices, and celebrates the presence of God while being dynamic, nourishing, and renewing. Such ideas are consistent with the kind of individual God created in His image with capacity to think and to act with purpose.

Simon's story is a portrayal of the way faith grows and matures and the conditions that contribute towards its emergence. He has made meaningful connections and seen patterns within a "bigger picture" as his experience in formal Biblical Studies reflects a shift from surface knowledge to deeper meaning.

The Ultimate Goal of Christian Education

Andersen (1984) takes the view that Christian education has much in common with the New Testament *ekklesia* as conceived by the apostle Paul. Both represent complementary ministries that seek to build community.

It was [Christ] who gave some to be...pastors, [and]...teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:11, 12)

Paul's comments imply a prior need, a human predicament, and a fundamental need for restoration to wholeness and meaning. The word translated as "prepare" has significant connotations (Barclay, 1958). The word is *katartismos* from the verb *katartizein*. It implies *healing*, for example in the setting of a broken limb, or restoring a dislocated joint. It also has significance in the political sense of bringing together alienated parties to enable government to continue. In essence, this process represents a reversal of the alienation resulting from the sin of our first parents. Christian schools adopting such a vision and mission truly emulate the redemptive, restorative ministry of Jesus himself as he reiterated in conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:17) that he had come to the world that it might be "saved." That ministry of restoration also has salvific significance. "Salvation" is reconciliation in the most comprehensive sense. As Westly (p. 46) explains:

Salvation in the biblical sense cannot be understood in one-dimensionally, narrow, reductionist, parochial ways. The salvation the Scriptures speak of offers a comprehensive wholeness in this fragmented and alienated life. Salvation in the biblical sense is a newness of life, the unfolding of true humanity in the fullness of God (Colossians 2:9), it is salvation of the soul

and the body, of the individual and society, of humankind and the whole of creation. (Ephesians 4:11, 12; Romans 8:19)

It is for such reasons that Knight (1980) also argues that Christian education is true ministry and each teacher, an “agent of salvation” (pp. 186–187). It is also “religion” in essence (Latin *religere* = “to bind together again”). But, returning to Paul and the word *katartismos*, it is important to note that the purpose of restoration is to facilitate “works of service.” In other words, *koinonia* (fellowship, community) is an outcome of unselfish activity, not as an end to be sought simply for its own sake. Nevertheless, it is an indicator that something significant, dynamic, and fundamental is happening. In recognition of this potential, the ultimate goal of Christian education may be stated as:

The restoration of the image of God in humankind through the harmonious development of the mental, social, physical, and spiritual faculties.

Not only are nuances of community reflected here, but so too, is a pedagogy and environment that is sensitive to and supportive of all these faculties. What we are speaking of here is whole-person education that nurtures all facets of humanness. This gives new meaning and significance to the word “integrity.” But while this is an ultimate aspiration, again, like the *koinonia*, a sense of psychosocial wellbeing may be experienced despite circumstantial stress and trauma. The Hebrew word *shalom* also speaks of community wellbeing and peace and is a key word underpinning the meaning of “peace.” (Keller, n.d.).

Strategic Considerations

Thus far, the discussion has focused on the meaning and significance of the concept of community and what that means for Christian education when viewed as a “community of faith.” Events such as those affecting the lives of Becky and Simon portray how that might play out. But such experiences prompt several questions: How did those events come about? What factors appear to have been at play to produce those outcomes? Community is clearly the dynamic product of the interplay of all those factors, and the potential they bring individually and collectively to the mix. Identifying conditions that have contributed towards those outcomes would be a promising

starting point in devising and formulating strategic plans and models for use at various levels in the administration, development, and improvement of Christian schools as communities of faith. Realistically, community at this level is complex.

In this discussion, we have considered the idea of a faith community as it might apply in both school and church contexts, noting important features that they share. It should not be forgotten that each has a different role to play as social entities with a distinctive character, purpose, and function. For most people, schools are primarily about teaching, learning, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills in preparation for a useful life in society. Accordingly, school has a utilitarian value that is remote from matters of personal and corporate faith. Public education is expected to be, and pretends to be, somehow “spiritually neutral.” However, those efforts are still value-saturated, and highlight a contrast between itself and Christian education. The elements that comprise the process of teaching and learning do not exist in a vacuum. This means that in a Christian school, the pedagogical aspect of teaching and learning is embedded in the culture of the school.

The Culture of the Christian School

A school’s culture reflects the community’s identity, its vision, and its sense of mission. Traditionally, this reality is grounded in and derived from its metanarrative. For most Christian schools with an evangelical biblical orientation, this metanarrative is based on the Creation-Fall-Redemption-Restoration drama played out in Scripture. The meanings, values, ideas, *mores* and customs that make up Christian culture will be lived out and expressed between the teachers and other members of the school community.

Cultural life is reflected in the regular patterns of behaviour initiated and promoted by the school and each teacher. Aspects include:

- Beliefs and understandings
- Stories and traditions
- Worship, ceremony and ritual
- Identity and participation
- Language and metaphors

- Ethos, values and *mores*
- Buildings, décor and facilities
- Uniforms, mottos and identifying symbols
- Rules, regulations and procedures

The Teaching and Learning Domain

In this domain, teaching and learning means much more than merely the transfer and reproduction of information. It is also sensitive and responsive to the characteristics of human nature, as discussed earlier. Palmer (1998, pp. 74–75) invokes the idea of “space” as a metaphor to represent intentional activity and acknowledges thoughtful, creative choices of action. In its connotations, it is consistent with the way God created humans in His image. Facets of personhood come into focus when seeking the kind of restoration and connectedness discussed so far. Four such spaces are thus identified: the *intellectual*, the *emotional*, the *social*, and the *physical* spaces.

The Intellectual Space: This space acknowledges assumptions of how we envisage teaching and learning in a pedagogical sense. It is what subconsciously comes into view when we identify with some form of schooling, for example subject content, concepts, the students, teaching and learning practices, and assessments. In view of the preceding discussion, and other commentary (Roy, 2001, pp. 635–6), teachers who exemplify the behaviour needed to create and maintain authentic Christian schools will aim:

- to “restore the integrity of knowledge” by seeking to make “connections between the knower and the known, between the head and the heart,” instead of “subject matter in isolated, cognitively-framed, meaningless pieces” in order to “create sophisticated maps in their whole being” enriched with “the symbolic and metaphoric richness of biblical faith” (Walsh, 1997, p. 19).
- to “acknowledge and affirm the diversity of intelligences and gifts shared between the learners” (Fowler, 1997, pp. 136–153).
- to provide a pedagogy that includes multisensory engagement and application, personal reflection, feelings, and identification for each student.

- to promote peer sharing, and collaborative, cooperative learning (Lambert, 1997, pp. 163–4).
- to engage in assessment and evaluation practices which will ideally motivate and support constructive learning and the achievement of goals rather than interpersonal competitiveness and the ranking of individuals (Fowler, 1997, pp. 150-1).

Emotional Space: This space is where recognition is given to the pervading climate and ambience of the school. It is the emotional climate and ethos that supports or inhibits learning. In essence, a safe, caring, supportive environment inspires assurance and confidence. Students will be more likely to be creative and take calculated risks if their responses are viewed with sensitivity and are affirmed by their teachers and fellow students alike. A teacher's ability to recognise signs of personal difficulty, confusion, frustration or interpersonal tensions, and the ability to deal with them constructively, is of paramount importance and embodies grace. Subject information, guidelines, expectations, and procedural items should be clearly organized and communicated to minimize confusion and anxiety.

Social Space: This space complements the emotional space in the impact on the quality of learning. It accounts for the interpersonal relationships that characterise the life of the school and classroom – between teachers, students, and peers, promoting and nurturing social relationships that are sensitive, accepting, inclusive, affirming and supportive of all members of the school community. Roles of authority will be played out with a sense of empathy, respect, humility, and service. (Roy, 2001, p. 43)

Physical Space: This space accounts for the physical embodied dimension of humanness that recognises the significance of personal health and well-being and the conditions that support them including human behaviour, environmental conditions and material facilities that support or inhibit development. Its complementary relationship with the other spaces is important.

Spiritual Space: This space acknowledges a sense of the Transcendent in response to personal restlessness, and a craving for meaning, fulfilment, and shalom. Of all the spaces, it is the least tangible, and manageable and when observable, by virtue of its manifestation. While the connotations of transcendence see it in

contrast with supernatural reality, a Christian view of spirituality connotes the presence and potential of the Trinitarian Spirit.

The Complementarity of the Spaces

In my earlier caveat, I stressed the complementary nature of the factors that contribute to the emergence of communities of faith. The spaces are interdependent to the extent that the depletion of any one space will have a disastrous impact on the possibility of community being realised in a school. For example, some students in a secondary school that appear to excel with sophisticated pedagogy and excel in academic achievement may feel intimidated and anxious if the learning environment and the relationships within it are deficient.

For Christian teachers, the school as a community of faith represents a reality and opportunity to practise the presence of God, even in the apparently secular subjects. It need not necessarily be overt or directly connected to the content of the subject. Recognition of our students as fellow creatures in the image of God, and relating to them accordingly, is a sacred reality. For example, the Carmelite monk, Brother Lawrence (1982), practised the presence of God through the washing of pots and hands and serving his brothers. Whatever is done to foster deep connection, meaning, and purpose in the lives of students is truly spiritual wherever God is truly present.

There will often be what I regard as “serendipitous moments” when inspired, unplanned insights do emerge from something being studied. Or it may have nothing directly to do with the subject matter, but nevertheless, enriches the moment being shared. Such moments are rich, memorable, and bonding. Sometimes they will be the product of a Christian teacher’s systematic practice, but on other occasions, such instances will be a spontaneous manifestation of the faith, grace, and integrity of the teacher flowing into and enriching the learning community, to the glory of God. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber describes such moments as “theophanies,” that is, points at which humanity experiences “a meeting and encounter with the living God... in the concrete places of this life” (Westly, 1988, p. 64). Following Buber, Westly describes theophanies as:

rare and privileged moments when without warning Love (God) breaks through and makes its presence felt, revealing as it does

the real meaning of salvation/reconciliation, and calling each one of us out of our individual concerns, out beyond even our own small communities to a world that awaits 'salvation'. (1988, pp. 69–70)

These “meetings and encounters with the living God” are significant in an interpersonal sense. It is in ministering to our neighbour that we meet our Lord Jesus in verity: as Jesus Himself declared, “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me”. (Matthew 25:40)

Some teachers have difficulty in seeing how all this fits with the academic character emphasised so prominently in contemporary schools, particularly at the senior high school level. There is a tendency to compartmentalise the spiritual and technical aspects. We all appear to have been socialised thoroughly in a culture that is antagonistic to Christianity, and this has affected much of our educational practice. Despite our attempts to cultivate a positive school ethos, many current practices cause individuality, competition, and thus, fragmentation.

This reminds me of something that took place in my own school some years ago that captures the richness and nuances of what community might look like in a real-life school setting. Let me share it with you.

Steven's Story

One afternoon, Pastor James Willis, one of the Religious Studies teachers at my school, came into my office looking somewhat flustered. “I hope I've done the right thing!” he said. He explained how he had just given his year 9 class a written assignment for homework based on Jonah's experience in delivering a message from God to Nineveh. One of the students in the class named Steven had asked if he could draw a cartoon rather than writing an essay. Pastor Willis had seen enough of Steven and his doodling in class to recognise that he had an exceptional gift. He also knew that Steven was rather self-conscious about his literary ability. So, a deal was struck. Steven could draw a cartoon, while the rest of the class would write an essay.

A few days later, after staff worship, Pastor Willis proudly displayed Steven's production. It was a masterpiece! I can still recall the glint in the eye of the whale as it swam toward the terrified Jonah!

Throughout the day that followed, teachers around the school went out of their way to warmly congratulate Steven, and his self-esteem soared. All day, he was two metres tall and the smile on his face almost as wide! It had exceeded his teacher's wildest expectations. In all, the sense of the presence of God was palpable.

But there's more to the story. Around 15 years after that event, I was walking down the main street in a nearby town. As I passed a tattoo studio, I glanced through the window. I could scarcely believe my eyes as I recognised Steven inside. In that same moment he also saw me and came bounding out to greet me. After the usual pleasantries and catching up, I asked him if he remembered the cartoons. His reverent smile said it all. Again, in that moment, in the street, God's Presence was truly shared. A few weeks later, in my church, I saw Steven's parents in the congregation, which they were visiting. After the service I made my way across to them to tell them of my meeting with Steven after all the years and recall the story of the cartoons. "Yes," they replied warmly, "he called and told us." It meant a great deal to them too. Steven's teacher had been an agent bringing connection, wholeness, and community to countless others.

Conclusion

In today's consumer world, we tend to regard schools as places where the emphasis is on accessing and processing information. But while that is certainly a part, it is only a part of true learning and gaining wisdom. True learning is conducive to faith and depends on a community in which there are obligations and responsibilities for each member. The contribution of each affects the ethos, culture, and integrity of the learning community. Huebner's (1987) image of "weaving" the "fabric of life" from shared cultural beliefs, concepts and memories is a depiction of the kind of active personalities that God created in His image. The process is dynamic, nourishing, and renewing. Such ideas are consistent with the kind of intelligent, active personalities God created in His image. In this process, teachers hold a key role. The connections made as a result will be evident in the life, ethos, and relationships that represent authentic school community for life in this world and assurance for life to come.

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