

HEALTH, SAFETY AND CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT IN LEARNING

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Introduction

To establish and maintain a healthy, safe and conducive learning environment is a formidable task. Several factors are responsible for this. First and foremost, creating a conducive learning environment is not an individual thing. It is a collaborative venture that requires the cooperation of the school management, school personnel, the learners, parents and the community. To achieve this, requires robust administrative skills and commitment. Also, there must be a healthy working relationship among all stakeholders. The learner's health and safety are paramount. In present day Nigeria, it is very difficult to achieve complete well being because of the poor economy of the nation. The idea of establishing and maintaining a learning environment that is safe, nurturing and welcoming all students is an acceptable one, but how can one handle the wide disparity in family background, values and traits of the learners? The problem becomes compounded with the uncontrolled student population utilizing inadequate facilities and dilapidated structures. Students do not only need to feel physically safe in their schools, they must be emotionally and intellectually safe as well. The fact that students who feel safe and secure in their school

environment are apt to do well and graduate on schedule makes it imperative to create an environment that is conducive to learning. The purpose of this write up therefore is to underscore the impact of good health, safety and a conducive environment in fostering learning and to highlight ways of maintaining and sustaining it.

The Meaning of Health

The World Health Organization (WHO, 1978) defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. This definition set forth a goal towards which the individual should aim. It is not just a matter of physical well being, emotional and mental health are equally important (Ademuwagun Ajala, Oke, Moronkola and Jegede, 2002). In the same vein, Udon and Ajala (2005) referred to health as a quality, resulting from the total functioning of the individual in his environment that empowers him to achieve a personally satisfying and socially useful life. I wish to state that in view of the above, health is that state or quality which enables an individual to face up to crisis, carry out his daily responsibilities efficiently, and relate to other persons effectively. Good health requires an

achievement of a socially useful life and meaningful contribution to the health and welfare of one's society as influenced by the prevailing culture and immediate environment. It is clear, however, that the health of a learner is more than absence of a minor or major illness. Ajala (2005) posited that it is a synergy of one's biological status, behaviour, as well as the product of personal and philosophical values that have been tied to individual self concept.

Safety in Schools

In order to learn, learners need to feel safe and supported. Safety in the school environment in this context refers to the prevention of accidents or other health hazards through considerably secure facilities and equipment and through well planned and intelligent choices of classroom, sports field, swimming pool, gymnasium, laboratories and school farm where guidance is needed in order to avoid accidents. It has been noted that series of tragedies had struck as a result of dilapidated buildings that collapsed and killed learners as a consequence of poor standard of existing structures and lack of maintenance of same. For instance, in 1986, a primary three pupil – Gbolade Abiodun at a school in Ikorodu, Lagos State

was crushed to death when his classroom wall collapsed on him (Newswatch Nov 9, 1987).

Safety in schools and other environment should be a cooperative venture by school management, school personnel, learners, individual and community safety organizations. It is the responsibility of the school to ensure that learners are well grounded on how to prevent hazards in the school environment as well as how to avoid it when it occurs in a learning environment.

A safe school environment is a function of both effective administrative leadership and effective teaching. A learner in the school environment will feel confident and will have the capability to take care of himself and others if he has developed protective skills and is knowledgeable in safety principles. Consequently, safety could be seen as the avoidance and prevention of injuries or death as the case may be.

In the learning environment, there abound many potentially hazardous conditions that cannot be totally eliminated or avoided. Thus, safe living demands the ability to function at optimum level in the presence of hazards. It is therefore important that safety attributes be developed in

the learners for them to have the desire and ability to protect themselves and others from unnecessary risks or dangerous acts which permeate the learning environment in Nigeria.

School Learning Environment

Going by the definition in the free Dictionary by Farlex, school learning environment is the sum of the internal and external circumstances and influences surrounding and affecting a person's learning. Consequently, providing a safe learning environment will involve every aspect of creating a positive experience for learners. It goes beyond having bars on windows and iron doors at the entrance of the school though they are necessary precautionary measures. A new student in this kind of environment expressed his feeling to his parents at the first opportunity of going back home thus: "At school, the windows have bars, there are video cameras on the lobbies, at the front entry there is a metal door. I feel like a prisoner, I don't feel protected at all".

This is an indication that it is very important to provide learners a healthy, safe and inviting learning environment where they are protected from physical and emotional harm. This is central to the mission of all

schools and it should be so pursued. The school personnel should realize that healthy and safe school learning environments are not just places with advanced security procedures. The focus is making the school environment a place that will help learners develop assets that will allow them to succeed even in difficult circumstances. A safe learning environment should focus on academic achievement, maintaining high standards, fostering positive relationships between staff and students and encouraging parental and community involvement.

In order to create a safe and healthy school environment, efforts should be made to create a school climate that has zero tolerance for cultism, bullying, intimidation, terrorism and various other anti social behaviour. In other words, a positive school climate will exist when all learners feel comfortable, wanted, valued, accepted and secured in an environment where they can interact with caring people whom they can trust. In view of the above, administrators should bear in mind that the best learning environment is one that has high challenge but low stress and minimal sources of fear.

The key Elements of the Learning Environment

If education in school is to be effective, the environment needs to be conducive to learning. The key elements of an environment such as amount of space, access to the outdoors for games and sports, arrangement of classrooms or lecture theater, availability of a variety of materials, equipment and facilities, arrangement of structures and lighting play a role not only in safety and health but in learners' well being, happiness and creativity, their learning to live in and with the natural environment and their cognitive and social development. This is often referred to as the physical environment of the school. When the physical environment of the school has been well grounded, the learners will be able to interact with space and time during the learning and teaching process. This is an important element in the relationship between students and teachers. The school personnel should endeavour to create and maintain a stimulating learning environment through effective school organization in order to allow meaningful interactive and a climate of innovation. For instance, sports arena, worship houses and classrooms should be arranged in such a way that there will only be minimal interference from the different structures. One needs to applaud the efforts

of the Ondo State government for changing the physical environment of our schools especially the Mega schools. This had brought joy and happiness to the hearts of many parents and purposeful challenge to the learners too. A similar venture had been embarked upon by the Osun State Government with dilapidated buildings brought down; new ones are springing up, taking into consideration the welfare of the mainstream and disabled learners.

In Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, the management has consistently and relentlessly pursued the creation and maintenance of an enabling environment in the college by upgrading the physical structures, through the construction of many spacious and well equipped lecture theatres, a beautiful and secure school entrance, perimeter fencing and beautification of the College (among others) to ensure healthy, safe and conducive environment for both learners and the entire school community.

In fact, the College has undergone tremendous transformation and more is still expected. The same can be said of this noble citadel of learning (Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti). As one enters this university, one is apt to think he is in another milieu outside Nigeria. This is due to its beautifully organized and well-planned physical environment.

Other salient factors to be considered in the physical environment of the school are ambience (reduction of noise in the school environment), learners' population and respect for learners' choices. In view of the above therefore, there is no gain saying that the physical environment of the school can affect learner's academic achievements in a variety of ways.

Another key element in the school environment is the psychosocial otherwise known as 'school climate'. This key element is grounded in the attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviour of all who occupy and learn in the sports arena, venues of activities and lecture theatres within the school. The school climate should invoke feelings of inclusion, physical and psychological safety and connectedness. It is important to point out that feeling connected to school is a protective factor against negative sexual and drug use behaviour, among others. There should be welcoming gestures and high expectations including the expectation that every learner can succeed. The school should invite learning and celebrate individual interests and uniqueness. This often encourages the learner to excel.

Furthermore, and most importantly, the third key element that plays a prominent role in establishing an environment conducive to learning is the social environment. This is a place where individuals can work and

learn together collaboratively with others in course groups, study groups or in project and team spaces. This involves creating an environment where learners just click together as a team and are supportive of one another. It depicts a situation where learners are free to take risks as discussed in the physical and psycho-social environment. The social environment requires good organizational and time management skills. Meaningful relationships are important ingredients here. In this regard, the school environment should be warm, friendly and caring. It has been said that a welcoming environment brings the best out of the learner. This is greatly reinforced where the school administrator and personnel are approachable and compassionate. It is equally the responsibility of the school personnel to ensure that social environment relationships are well established. There is the need to bring about good student-to-student relationships and teacher (male and female) to student relationships.

Since the school cannot be an island to itself, it should encourage community-to-parent-to-school relationships. This is often referred to as 'town and gown' relationship. Where there is a pleasant relationship between the school and the larger community, the learners feel safe and confident to relate with people around them and in turn experience peace

which can impact their academic achievement positively. This can also go a long way in giving learners a sense of belonging, encourage wholesome relationships with peers as well as personal attachment to people within the community. Also, conducive relationship reduces the rate of violence amongst learners and within the community. It is therefore of utmost importance for the school to purposefully coordinate these three elements in order to establish a school environment that is conducive to learning.

How to maintain Healthy, Safe and Conducive Environment to Learning

It has been said that a conducive environment refers to the mood and atmosphere inside the school that motivates learners to participate actively in learning and to be engaged in the school activities. The school must recognize the need to maintain such an established conducive environment. In fact, this is the challenges that often faces school administrators and personnel. This is so because the school environment is dynamic, as learners' moods and emotions are unpredictable. Therefore, when learning is not optimal, certain strategies are to be put in place to regain the conducive environment.

The School Condition: The first component for success in the learning environment is the school condition. This entails provision of standardized facilities and structures, conducive lecture theatres, classroom management, curricular choices and proper structural arrangement.

People : Another important component of the ideal learning environment are the people which include learners, the teachers and the parents.

Learners need people with positive and constructive mindset who project positive energy around them that will help bring out the positive and constructive mindset within them. Teachers should be good role models in dressing, maintain neat and orderly classrooms, employ consistently and maintain an interesting and inspirational décor through the use of bright and inspirational teaching aids.

Parents too can be involved in helping their children achieve success in school. This is possible, when parents are more available to their children's schools and teaching personnel. This is necessary because when there is a positive relationship between a parent and the school, problems, questions and confusion can be easily solved and kept to a minimum. For instance, in Adeyemi College of Education, a 'Parent-Teacher-Alumni

Forum' has been established for some time now and has been very functional and helpful in solving a lot of problems in the school environment.

Motivational Techniques

Motivating students is one of the most difficult parts of being a school educator because what motivates one learner may not necessarily motivate the other. The teacher needs to utilize various motivational techniques in order to reach the learner. For instance, the teacher can use praise to bring about improvement in learners' performance. The school personnel can offer choices to the learners with minimum supervision.

Meaningful relationships can be built with those learners who are more people oriented. Financial rewards can be given to learners as in this institution (Afe Babalola University Ado-Ekiti) (ABUAD), which had announced in the Punch of Tuesday, March 26, 2013 how it has dedicated 28.5 million naira as cash prizes for students and staff in order to sustain academic excellence, moral uprightness, positive behavior modification and sincerity of purpose within the school environment. This definitely is an

example of a welcoming environment that is needed by learners and staff, especially those who are struggling in school and need extra support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as a counselor and an educator, I have found myself often in the position of a personal change agent. It should be pointed out that personal change requires courage that arises from a condition of safety. It must be noted too that safety is paramount in any place where there is a gathering of people. This makes it the responsibility of the school personnel to provide a healthy learning environment for all categories of learners. This will ensure freedom from risks or harm in the learning environment. As much as possible school personnel should endeavour to cultivate zero tolerance to learners' misbehavior. Learners need boundaries in order to feel safe and secure enough to explore the world around them. One way to do this is to ensure that students do not breach their matriculation oath as long as they are still students.

Recommendations

Safety in schools begins with a plan involving procedures and practices. In order to maintain a conducive environment for students, the following are recommended.

- Rules and regulations should be stated with positive language and should be well publicized and made available to every member of the school environment.
- A balance should be created between a safe school and caring environment. In this regard efforts should be made to create a school climate that has zero tolerance for bullying, intimidation, cultism, terrorism, vandalism and general delinquencies.
- Students, especially their leaders should be taught how to reduce conflict, manage and resolve it.
- School administrators and personnel should show interest in the academic achievement and welfare of the students. Enthusiasm, love and positiveness must be shown to the learners.

- Motivational techniques are necessary to push the learners past what they are capable of achieving so as to increase learning and open them up to new challenges.
- Anti-bullying and anti-cultism campaigns should be encouraged and their clubs formed amongst students.
- Dress code should be formulated and enforced among members of the school community.
- Proper orientation on academic culture should be given to fresh students and newly employed staff on a regular basis.
- There should be an effective Parent-Staff Forum where parents would be able to contribute positively in the school environment.
- Intra-mural sports and games should be regularly organized to positively engage the students and staff during their leisure hours as this will go a long way in promoting good health, positive behavior and cordiality among the students and staff.

Thank you for listening.

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