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

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Bestowing the Blessing: Practical Strategies for Christian Educators

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Bestowing the Blessing: Love in Action

Mr. Jones, a committed Christian who teaches in the public school system, was approached by a former student after his eighth grade graduation ceremony. Still remembering the name of this young man he had taught as a sixth-grader, Mr. Jones smiled, gave Daniel a high five, and asked how he was doing. Daniel confided that it had been a rough year, in part because of his parents' divorce. He sensed that Mr. Jones' expression of concern was more than simply superficial so he continued to open his heart to him. Daniel shared that he had been jumped and knifed by gang members on the campus of the high school he would be attending. Although he had escaped serious injury, his brother had been badly hurt, and fearful thoughts plagued him about what the next school year would bring.

In a compassionate tone, Mr. Jones asked him more questions about his life, looked directly into his eyes, and occasionally reached out and reassuringly patted him on the back. As the details of Daniel's painful struggles unfolded, Mr. Jones' eyes began to well up with tears. Mr. Jones lightly grasped his student's shoulder for a moment and told him he believed he had a bright future ahead of him. He encouraged the young man by telling him he was proud of him for continuing in school despite his difficulties. As Daniel turned to leave, Mr. Jones gave him a warm handshake, assuring the young man that he would not forget him. Daniel smiled when Mr. Jones said he would be available if he ever needed help or wanted to talk again.

In this real life interchange, Mr. Jones illustrated each element of the principle of bestowing the five-fold blessing suggested by Smalley and Trent (1998) in their book *The Blessing: Giving the Gift of Unconditional Love and Acceptance*. Although he did not speak of his faith in Christ, Mr. Jones demonstrated a godly concern for his young student by treating him

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with compassion, care, and respect. While Daniel may not yet know that Jesus loves him, he certainly feels that Mr. Jones does.

Bestowing the Blessing: Strategies for Christian Teachers

Jesus' love for children was made evident when "he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them, and blessed them" (Mark 10:16, New International Version). God calls certain individuals to be classroom teachers so that they might be the embodiment of his care and compassion for young people. When motivated by a love for learning and a love for people, Christians can be highly effective and influential teachers in either public or private school settings. As the debate about expressions of faith in God in the public schools becomes increasingly contentious, teachers are understandably anxious about what they may or may not say to their students on the subject of religion. Although it is the legitimate desire of all Christian teachers to bless their students, specific messages that could be construed as religious have been prohibited by the courts for teachers in public schools (First Amendment Center, 1999). Actions, however, speak louder than words, and Christian teachers can serve as the arms and voice of Jesus in their classrooms in a variety of ways. Gary Smalley and John Trent (1986) have set forth a five-fold plan in which one generation passes a blessing on to the next. Although they addressed primarily parents, their techniques can be readily adapted by teachers for use in either the public or the Christian school classroom.

Smalley and Trent (1986) cited the universal need for acceptance and the lifelong problems that can result when children do not receive the blessing of their parents. Goleman (1995), in his discussion of the importance of emotional intelligence for success in school and beyond, referred to a survey of parents indicating that the present generation of children is much more emotionally troubled than previous generations. As homes become increasingly fractured

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and dysfunctional, children are relying more and more on their teachers as sources of support. Teachers often function as comforters, advisors, and caregivers when parents fail to fulfill these responsibilities. In their book, which seeks to help parents and others provide children with a foundation of unconditional acceptance, Smalley and Trent (1986) examined Old Testament passages explaining and illustrating the bestowal of the family blessing. From this Scriptural basis, they created a list of key elements useful to all adults who wish to contribute positively to the well-being of young people. The five components are described as follows:

A family blessing begins with *meaningful touching*. It continues with a *spoken message of high value*, a message that pictures *a special future* for the individual being blessed, and one that is based on an *active commitment* to see the blessing come to pass (Smalley & Trent, 1986, p.27).

The efficacy of this approach, easily adaptable by classroom teachers, can be supported by biblical principles, educational theory, and empirical research.

Meaningful Touch

Jesus was a hands-on teacher. Not only did he lay his hands on the children as he blessed them, he also was noted for touching and being touched by lepers, sinners, and people in need of mental, spiritual, and physical healing. The important connection between well-being and physical touch as an expression of love, affection, and acceptance is well-documented (Key, 1975; Montagu, 1971). Recent concerns about liability have created much anxiety about teachers' continued ability to reach out and touch their students, but the important benefits of this practice have caused a reluctance to abandon it entirely and have prompted further inquiry.

Hansen (2007) explored the important role caring touch plays in the establishment of a positive classroom climate conducive to learning. A review of the relevant research showed that

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the benefits of touch are four-fold: emotional, physical, social, and intellectual. A child's self-perception is enhanced when he or she receives touch in a loving fashion (Burgoon & Saine, 1978; Montagu, 1971; Weiss, 1984). Conversely, emotional indifference, detachment, and estrangement may result when children are deprived of tactile experiences (Fast, 1970; Montagu, 1971). Socially, students profit because "positive touching experiences reassure people they are needed and valued" (Hansen, 2007, p.160). Even intellectually, students stand to gain from touch because of the way the human brain and body are wired. One study of isolated infants showed that human contact caused a rapid turn-around and resulted in great gains in their cognitive, emotional, and social development (Buscaglia, 1982). So important is tactile stimulation that the withholding of physical touch from infants has even been seen to result in death in extreme cases (Colt, 1997). Frighteningly, research points to the possibility that children who are deprived of touch may develop into adults who are destructive and violent (Blondis & Jackson, 1977; Burgoon & Saine, 1978).

Now, because of the criminal misdeeds of a few child predators, the issue of teachers being able to touch their students is growing increasingly difficult. The National Educational Association (NEA) has advised against all physical contact with students in the event that even innocent behavior might be deemed sexual in nature ("Let's Not," 2000). Researchers have begun to explore the negative effects this restriction is having on students and the manner in which teachers are handling it. Andrzejewski and Davis (2008) studied teachers who consider human contact a meaningful part of the way they interact with students. The subject of this inquiry was the way in which teachers make decisions about when it may be appropriate to risk touching a student. The research conclusions were that the taboo surrounding touch in education has led to a major disservice being done to students who might have benefited from human

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contact. The teachers interviewed expressed a willingness to take risks to provide necessary support to students. For example, these teachers were willing to overlook their feared vulnerability to sanctions in cases where they strongly sensed a student's need for comforting arm around a shoulder at a moment of emotional distress. Others were willing to employ the use of the teacher's hand to guide the child's hand in writing with a pencil. Jones (2003) found that "touching children is now well embedded as one of the risks which must be managed as an aspect of contemporary teaching practices" (p.192).

While the necessity of cautiously maintaining a posture that is above reproach remains in this increasingly litigious society, teachers can still find ways to reach their students with meaningful touch. Gestures as formal as a handshake or as casual as a fist-bump or high five may still be used. A wise and discerning teacher who is praying for students regularly will be in tune with the particular preferences and needs of individuals. He or she will know which particular student would resist even the slightest touch, and which student would respond favorably to an appropriately light and friendly pat on the shoulder. Hansen (1997) proposed further guidelines for teachers who wish to be able to utilize physical contact appropriately. One suggestion was to ask a student for permission. Another recommendation was to limit touch to the head, shoulders and back.

Judicious use of physical proximity can be employed as well. A teacher who wants to convey a sense of warmth should avoid holding him or herself at a formal distance from students by retreating behind a desk or podium. An effective strategy to foster rapport might be simply for the teacher to sit in among students during class discussions. Arranging the classroom in such a way that the teacher can move in and out among the desks and so have direct access to each

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student is helpful as well. An open and engaging smile and direct eye contact are always advantageous in establishing meaningful personal connections with students.

A Spoken Message

Smalley and Trent (1986) observed God's pattern of blessing mankind with the spoken word, starting in Gen.1:3, where he spoke the universe into existence. Jesus is known as "The Word who became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). It is also noteworthy that God spoke audibly to affirm Jesus on the occasion of his baptism when he said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt.3: 17). Everyone needs to hear encouraging words: Mark Twain famously observed, "I can live for two months on a good compliment."

Noddings' (1999) influential work in the ethic of care confirmed the need students have for "the continuing attention of adults who will listen, invite, guide and support them" (p.13). One effective practice is to make a deliberate effort to speak personally to each student by name on a daily basis. Learning the names of students as early in the year as possible is critical, as is creating a classroom environment where students are invited to share about their lives outside of school. Teachers who spend a few moments regularly discussing their own outside interests and hobbies are opening the door for students to do likewise. Teachers will find that their attendance at student athletic events or artistic performances will please their students and increase teacher-student rapport. When the teacher demonstrates a personal interest in each student in this manner, the stage will be set for those difficult times when a student may need an adult voice to provide guidance and encouragement.

Wong and Wong (1998) asserted that the first few weeks of school are critical in determining a student's ultimate success, contending that the most important factor in student achievement is the teacher's high expectations. The research basis for this claim is well-

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established, beginning with the classic study by Rosenthal & Jacobsen in 1960. Teachers were misled into thinking that a randomly selected group of students was comprised of high-achievers. After a year of the teachers working with what they thought were special students, researchers found that the children's impressive 20% gain in achievement over the course of the year could be attributed solely to the teachers' expectations that they would do well. Bamburg (1994), pointing to the importance of a positive emotional climate in the classroom, confirmed that teacher attitudes significantly affect student learning when he looked at the effect of low teacher expectations. It is clear that what a teacher says to students contributes greatly to their sense of self-esteem. It is, therefore, important that a teacher verbally express confidence in each student's ability to learn and grow.

Proverbs 3:27 says, "Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due." To be proactive in seeking the good in each student and to offer meaningful feedback are essential keys in blessing students through the spoken word. Students need teacher approval, and when they are not specifically affirmed, they may assume disapproval or rejection. Philippians 4:8 advises believers to focus on that which is "lovely, truthful, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy"; viewing student effort through this lens will prove to be beneficial.

Bartholomew (1993) studied effective strategies for praising students and noted four specific purposes: "(a) to recognize or show interest, (b) to encourage, (c) to describe what we see in their behavior, and (d) to evaluate their performance" (p. 3). Teachers should look for ways to comment not only academic achievement, but on demonstrations of good character as well. Specific feedback that explains exactly what was exemplary about a student's work is far more effective than generic phrases like "good job." In reviewing the literature on rewards, Marzano, Pickering, and Pollack (2001) concluded that praise is most effective when it is tied to

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a specific accomplishment, and that verbal affirmation works better than tangible rewards like stickers or candy. Or, in the words of King Solomon, “A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Proverbs 25:11).

Attaching a High Value

Smalley and Trent (1986) explained that to attach a high value to someone is to honor them. Teachers can honor and show respect for students by grading their papers promptly, providing meaningful feedback, attending to their questions, and finding ways to publish student work (Glasgow & Hicks, 2003). A teacher also demonstrates respect for students by making the effort to dress professionally. This conveys to the student the idea that what goes on in the classroom is of the utmost importance (Wong & Wong, 1988).

In attending to the needs of diverse learners, the classroom teacher expresses a concern for each individual (Salend, 1994; Tomlinson, 1999). Both mainstreamed students with disabilities and English language learners (ELLs) have gained a seat in the regular classroom due to legislation designed to ensure equity for all students, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Bikklen, Lehr, Searl, & Taylor, 1987). The inclusive classroom gives teachers an opportunity to model just how valuable and important they believe each person is. For example, a key element of achieving success in working with ELLs is learning about and incorporating elements of the subject culture in the classroom (Dellicarpini, 2008). When teachers show appreciation and respect for all cultures, they demonstrate that each person is worthy of esteem in God’s eyes.

Ayers (2003) wrote about an implied moral contract with students comprised of two elements. The first is the understanding that student effort will be required, that learning is not merely passively receiving information. The second element calls for the teacher to “demonstrate

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to students by daily effort and interaction that they are valued, that their humanity is honored, that their growth, enlightenment and liberation are core concerns” (p.3). For a Christian teacher, the opportunity to silently pray for students remains despite restrictions on corporate classroom prayers. To ask God to be used to help them to see and achieve their full potential is to both give and receive a blessing.

That Jesus attaches a high value to each individual is clearly expressed in several sections of Mathew’s gospel. His tone is particularly tender when he says, “Even the very hairs of your head are numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Matt.10: 30). Later in the passage, his words resonate, especially for those who are devoting their lives to teaching children: “If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, he will certainly not lose his reward” (Matt. 10:42, New International Version).

Picturing a Special Future

The Bible is replete with examples of the importance of picturing a special future. A popular memory verse, Jeremiah 29:11, says, “‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘ plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” In John 1:42, Jesus spoke to Simon Peter of a special future he could foresee for him. He gave him a new name, Cephas, indicating not who he was, but who he would become as a result of God’s work in his life. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter would become “the rock” on which Christ would build his church, although his demeanor as recorded in the gospels is anything but steady during his days of travelling with Jesus in Palestine. Students need to believe their teachers see real potential in them for future success if they are to remain motivated to persevere.

Rafe Esquith (2007), a teacher famous for his success with poor immigrant children, posts pennants from Ivy League schools around his classroom, labeled with the names of former

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students who have attended these institutions. He does this so that his pupils can get a vision for what is possible for those who work hard. A teacher who bestows a blessing on his or her students is one who helps them to formulate meaningful goals. Doing so teaches them the importance of a life of reflection and perseverance. Helping students to discover their strengths by providing access to online inventories or giving them opportunities to explore various intellectual pursuits both in and out of the classroom is a critical function of the empowering teacher. Bandura's (1977) work in self-efficacy affirms the fact that those who believe they can succeed are more likely to do so than those who lack this confidence. Their beliefs affect their actions in that they are more willing to be persistent and to expend full effort. The Bible speaks to this point as well: "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7, King James Version).

Active Commitment

Research has clearly demonstrated the positive effects on student achievement of teachers who are dedicated to their success (Park, 2005; Kushman, 1992). Smalley and Trent (1986) relayed an incident that provides a concrete example of this final component of the blessing. Smalley stated that one day a new teacher was assigned to his high school math class, half of which was failing. The teacher's opening words to the class were that if any of them failed, he would feel that he, too, had failed. He then made a commitment to doing whatever it would take to enable them to learn, including spending time individually tutoring them after school and on Saturdays. The result for the Smalley was his first "A" in math, and he never forgot that teacher who had dedicated himself to student success.

Wilkinson's (1992) central assertion in *The Seven Laws of the Learner* is that "the teacher is responsible to cause the students to learn" (p. 42). The implication if the student fails to learn is not that he or she is simply lazy or inept, but that the teacher did not exert the proper effort. He

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said, “the effective teacher knew how to cause the students to learn by readjusting what she did, what she said, and how she said it” (p. 35). Wilkinson emphasized the role of the teacher as a servant whose sole job is to serve his or her students. Jesus, who was the greatest teacher of all time, modeled this when he said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matt. 20:28).

A teacher dedicated to the success of his or her students will make a commitment to being a lifelong learner. Staying current with new technologies, seeking out emerging research on best practices, reading widely, and continuing to take courses both in pedagogy and subject areas will ensure that a teacher remains fresh, engaging, and effective. Enthusiasm and expertise on the part of their teachers are strong contributors to student motivation.

Conclusion

Smalley and Trent’s (1986) five-fold plan for bestowing a blessing on students can be seen to be sound when viewed from both a biblical and an educational research perspective. Andrzejewski and Davis (2008) reported that students who “feel supported by their teachers have higher self-esteem, are eager to please their teachers, and therefore experience greater motivation for learning” (p.2). Willard (1998) noted that in Jesus’ day, the sole goal of a teacher was not merely to impart information, but to change lives. In describing Jesus’ role as master teacher he stated:

The secret of the great teacher is to speak words, to foster experiences, that impact the active flow of the hearer’s life. That is what Jesus did by the way he taught. He tied his teaching to concrete events that make up the hearer’s lives. He aimed his sayings at their hearts and habits as these were revealed in their daily lives. (p.114)

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Careful students of Jesus' life realize there has never been a teacher who was Jesus' equal. Those who answer God's call to serve him in the classroom will find that his Word is filled with practical lessons about all aspects of this demanding and rewarding ministry. He will show those who have ears to hear how best to communicate truth in a way that reaches both the hearts and minds of students. Demonstrating the perfect balance of correction and encouragement, Jesus' words and actions as recorded in Scripture will inspire those whose calling it is to serve and to bless the next generation.

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