

8 CONDITIONS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE® FOR CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

Jacob had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

--Genesis 28:12

Dreams. Dreams, both sleeping and waking, have figured prominently in the story of people of faith. The dream of Abraham and Sarah to break with the polytheism of their ancestors and establish a family who would worship one God in a new land. The dreams of Joseph, which ran him afoul of his brothers, and ultimately led to their salvation. The dreams of the Hebrew people to be free of their enslavement in Egypt and their exile in Babylon. The dreams of the prophets for God's people to live faithful to the covenant. The dream of Joseph of Nazareth inviting him to an alternative course of action. The dream of Jesus that all would experience the mercy and forgiveness and love of God.

St. Augustine reminds us that that our dreams, our restless longings, in a sense, our aspirations, are from God and ultimately find rest only in God. A fundamental principle of much spirituality is to consider what one most deeply desires as a manifestation of what God desires for us. Many consider our ability to reason, to learn, in other words, to aspire to know more than we know now, is the highest part of what it means to be human. Our aspirations are what make us human. Animals do not aspire, nor do angels. We stand unique in creation ever wanting to understand and know and do and be more than we are at present.

For nearly two decades, the staff of the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations has been studying and fostering the conditions in schools that promote student aspirations. In particular, QISA has identified 8 Conditions – Belonging, Heroes, Sense of Accomplishment, Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity, Spirit of Adventure, Leadership & Responsibility, and Confidence to Take Action – that cultivate aspirations in schools. Although QISA's work has been in public education, their concerns are those of all educators. All education, secular as well as religious, is ultimately a transcendent activity. People are led out of themselves into higher and still higher viewpoints and ways of being. Calculus transcends algebra which transcends mathematics. Literary analysis transcends mere reading even as reading transcends learning to spell. Decisions based on moral principles transcend decisions based on self-satisfaction. Aspirations – the desire to understand, to know, to do, and to be more – are the driving force of all education.

The 8 Conditions developed by QISA are congenial to Christian education. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that one reason Christian schools succeed where public schools struggle is the inherent presence of these 8 Conditions to a greater degree. The purpose of this paper is to draw out the parallels between the Christian educational practices and the 8 Conditions that QISA has identified as making a difference in students' lives. Our hope is that Christian educators will find in the Quaglia Institute an ally and friend. We share a common dream – to improve teaching and learning in the present so that students are better equipped to reach their dreams in the future.

Belonging

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

--Acts 2:42

Among the 8 Conditions, Belonging is the most foundational. In any educational setting, from preschool to graduate school, students need to feel like they belong. In order for learning to take place, a sense of community must exist. Fostering Belonging and community is the first step because all the other steps depend on it. From the community of which I feel a part, I will seek out heroes. I will look for affirmation for my accomplishments. In the community, I will feel safe enough to laugh, to ask questions, to create, and to explore. Through the community, I will learn and practice the values to be a responsible leader and find the courage to act on my beliefs. Parker Palmer has written extensively about the importance to education of establishing a “community of discourse.”

A sense of community has long been central to Christian education, whether in schools or church communities. Most students attending a Christian school already consider themselves a part of a faith community. That identification exists on a wide spectrum, from the devout to those who are Christian in name only. Yet as a name or as a deeply held view of the world, “Christian” is something that is shared, that fosters Belonging. In church-based education and bible study, participation in the community’s prayer, worship, and service grounds the entire educational program. In a sense, the community does not just have a formation program, the community *is* a formation program. The same could be said of Christian schools.

Community, however, is never automatic. Community must be fostered and nourished. On the first leg of a journey toward reaching dreams together, Christians may have a head start, but in no way is that an invitation to complacency. On the contrary, it is something to build on. Christian educators can leverage the communal sense that accompanies being a follower of Christ to deepen students’ experience of Belonging. We can invite our students to consider the universal extent in both time and space of the community of which they are a part. Though there have been painful divisions, the followers of Jesus claim a two thousand year history and a worldwide membership. We are members of the community of the saints, both living and dead. Neither distance nor death is a barrier to the belonging of Christians.

Community is a precondition for all meaningful education. Whether it is the nine year journey of Christian elementary school students together, or the invitation at a lecture on Mark’s Gospel to greet the person sitting beside you, community is deeply Christian and must be part of any educational experience that considers itself Christian – school or community, preschool or seminary, classroom or keynote. Drawing on this communal sense is the first step in promoting the aspirations of the participants in education.

Heroes

There was an Ethiopian eunuch ... sitting in his chariot, and reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

--Acts 8:27-31

The second step on the Aspirations journey is Heroes. The Condition of Heroes in schools is about students knowing they have adults who care for them in their lives. Paulo Freire writes, "If I do not love the world – if I do not love life – if I do not love [people] – I cannot enter into dialogue." (Dialogue for Freire is the heart of education.) When students have others to turn to, to look up to, and to trust, their aspirations begin to flourish. Teachers, whether they are aware of it or not, are Heroes to students. Becoming mindful of this and deliberately fostering such a relationship is advantageous to all students.

This concept, too, is deep-rooted in Christianity. Saints, both of the capital and the lower case variety, are integral to being Christian and to educating others in faith. Understanding our faith, as well as living out our faith, depends upon trusted guides. The women and men who are our mentors and "leading learners" in the educational enterprise and in the life of faith are essential to its effectiveness. Indeed, as Christians we are all apprenticed to Jesus, but that apprenticeship relies on our apprenticeship to contemporary disciples of Jesus effectively living out his gospel among us.

From its origins, mentoring has been a key component of faith education. Godparents and sponsors play that role in a formal, and sometimes merely ceremonial, way. Yet the underlying principle ritualized at baptism is that faith is something "handed on" from one person to the next. This handing on is not the handing on of some static "deposit of faith," but rather the handing on of a way of life. Such a "traditioning," to use Maria Harris' term, requires modeling and mentoring. This mentoring principle should guide the thinking of all Christian educators. The Condition of Heroes, or having sponsors, is what makes the catechumenate program tick. From the relationship between spiritual director and directee, to the great saints and founders of religious orders, Christians have depended upon those ahead of us on the spiritual journey to guide us and lead us.

It is often said that the reason Christians schools succeed is due to their more strict discipline procedures. This may be true, but I suggest it is not the underlying factor. Love is. Discipline, for those who have no boundaries set for them any place else, is a sign of concern and love. Being held accountable for your actions is an act of love. We can be certain of this: Those teaching in Christian schools are not teaching for money or prestige or job security. They are teaching because they love students. They are teaching because they love Christ. They are teaching because they are Heroes.

Sense of Accomplishment

His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

--Matthew 25:23

The Condition of Sense of Accomplishment is about recognizing effort, perseverance, and a sense of responsibility to the community as signs of a person's success. This Condition broadens the notion of "accomplishment" in schools beyond narrowly academic categories to include personal growth and effort. Such accomplishments are not always measurable in outcomes or achievements that can be accumulated and averaged (as are grades). Yet such effort must be encouraged and celebrated if we desire students to persevere when learning is difficult. Being acknowledged for small accomplishments is a key condition for achieving success in greater accomplishments.

Again we are on terrain that is familiar to Christians. In Christian terms, Sense of Accomplishment is about the dignity and worth of the human person *as* human person. Augustine's intellectual battle with Pelagius long ago laid the foundation for the truth that there is nothing any of us can do to *earn* God's love; it is a free gift. Christianity has a profound sense that attaining the prize is not nearly as important as running the good race. In a theology which holds that grace is free, but never "cheap," what makes one "accomplished" is not having arrived, but rather having journeyed faithfully.

Good grades are their own reward, but sometimes effort needs encouragement. To have put in one's best effort, to have accomplished whatever one has accomplished with dignity and integrity, and to be celebrated for having done so is the heart of Sense of Accomplishment. All education must continue to move away from the bankrupt idea that my B+ is better than your B-, and into the realization that my B+ this term is better than my B- last term. *And* that what is most important is my *effort* to make progress, not the grade itself. Our grading systems notwithstanding, being given an "A for effort" is, in truth, more significant than the C representing how much content I know.

Christian school and community programs that wish to foster aspirations help students set achievable goals in all areas and celebrate the effort put in to reaching those goals. Perseverance is praised. Students' extracurricular accomplishments are acknowledged. Collective accomplishments are applauded. School assemblies applaud not only honors students and winning teams, but the students who had a dance recital, participated in their first science fair, or organized a food drive.

Fun & Excitement

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

--Matthew 11:19

The Condition of Fun & Excitement is about inspiring students to achieve their best. When this Condition is in place, students are engaged, emotionally involved in their education, and eager to learn. Students who exhibit Fun & Excitement are self-confident, curious, and prepared to meet the challenges of the day.

In Christian circles, the Condition of Fun & Excitement has been honored perhaps more in the breach than in the keeping. Nevertheless, that the human person was created by God to enjoy the rest of creation is without question. Saint Irenaeus wrote: "The glory of God is a human person fully alive." Being fully alive means being completely engaged in whatever one is doing. The Condition of Fun & Excitement parallels the deep Christian conviction that we are part of a creation that is very good in God's eyes and that is to be enjoyed. Christianity holds that the most profound joys in life, the truly exciting, is not this or that passing pleasure, but the ongoing, lifelong adventure that is life itself.

Many teachers object to this Condition, saying that they are not paid to be entertainers. True enough. But even if teaching is not about entertainment, it *is* about engagement. Effective teaching is about lessons that draw the student into the educational experience and so draw out of the student understanding and knowledge. How often have we heard our students say, "School is boring."? How can this be when discovery, learning, and dawning realization are among the most exciting experiences a human being can have? Could it be that schooling dampens the very spirit of fun that makes learning engaging? How will our students aspire to be more than they are if what we ask them to do in their classes is less exciting than their mindless afternoon cartoons?

Christian schools have a unique challenge around this particular Condition. We live in a culture that has a tendency to reduce spirituality and religion to piety. We may have even contributed to that perception by handing people a candle, when in fact what we have in our possession is a volcano. In the words of a popular song by Billy Joel:

They say there's a heaven for those who will wait
Some say it's better but I say it ain't
I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints
Sinners are much more fun ...
And only the good die young

Many confuse the effort to walk faithfully with solemnity and seriousness. Any one who has read the biographies of the saints, or who him or herself is attempting to live faithful to the gospel, knows how far from the truth this actually is. The challenge Christian educators have is to create conditions under which not only learning is perceived as fun and exciting, but the life of faith is seen as exhilarating.

Curiosity & Creativity

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.
--Matthew 7:7

This Condition is almost too obvious a concern for education to be even worth mentioning. However, actual practices in many classrooms make the presence of the Condition of Curiosity & Creativity anything but a given. The Condition of Curiosity & Creativity is characterized by inquisitiveness, eagerness, and a strong desire to discover and learn new things. Curiosity triggers students to ask “Why?” and Creativity gives them the space to ask “Why not?” Both are acts of the imagination and are at the very heart of aspirations and achievement. How sad to think that a student would be ridiculed for asking “a stupid question” or to have teachers who lectured leaving no space for participants’ own inquiries or inventiveness.

Christianity maintains that faith and reason are partners and that while faith can see further than reason, reason could take one quite a distance. As we read in 1 Peter: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” (1Peter 3:15) Jesus himself is a model of both curiosity (he often answers questions with other questions) and creativity (the parables). Our curiosity and creativity are God given and in fact are a reflection of our being created in the very image of God. Our desires to understand and to know, because they are infinite desires, ultimately lead us to God.

Here again Christian educators face a unique challenge. So many for so long have held that what the Bible or our elders teach is not to be questioned. Again, at points in its history, Christianity has been its own worst enemy in this regard. Consider the affect of a traditional catechism on a student’s curiosity and creativity. Here was a tool and method of Christian religious education that not only provided all the answers, but all the questions as well! Our methods have improved drastically. Students’ experiences, concerns and questions are regularly part and parcel of what Christian education is about. Students’ creativity is engaged in myriad ways. One only has to scan the wealth of curriculum materials that currently exist for Christian educators.

A Christian school or community program that is grounded in the belief that theology is “faith seeking understanding” and that, indeed, all inquiry and creativity are manifestations of our God given ability to wonder and imagine, will have Curiosity & Creativity high on its list of conditions to be fostered. A spirit of inquiry and investigation, of inspiration and inventiveness, will pervade every program and aspect of the curriculum. Students will have the freedom to learn and the resources to explore any and all questions that come to mind so that even our wonder will take on the shape of Christ. When all is said and done, doubt is not the enemy of faith, fear and apathy are.

Spirit of Adventure

Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan.

--Genesis 12:5

Spirit of Adventure is about the participants in education being able to take on positive, healthy challenges. Students experience the Spirit of Adventure when they undertake new subjects, articulate new understandings, and express new beliefs without fear of failure or success. Building students' self-confidence and empowering them to face the challenges they encounter every day – for some raising their hand in class, for others taking an advanced level course – is the key to successfully cultivating a Spirit of Adventure.

Risk taking is part and parcel of following the Way of Jesus. Not all the risks taken by men and women of faith have been “healthy” ones. However, the extreme risks taken by martyrs reveal that faith, by its nature, involves a security and hope in things unseen. The human person is fundamentally loved by God and so is free to risk – all if necessary. Faith is the antithesis of fear, and it is fear that must be removed for a Spirit of Adventure to flourish. Christian theology supports the idea that my value as a human being is not connected to anything I say or do. Rather, my value is in the fact that I am a person loved by God. This in turn ought profoundly to effect what I say and do, and given this grounding, I am free to risk adventure of any kind.

Christian schools historically have been safe havens for students. For example, many Catholic religious orders with educational charisms were motivated by a desire to reach out and support disenfranchised children and their families. Many Christian schools arise out of a need to protect young people from the unhealthy risks encouraged in a more secular setting. With an attitude of unconditional acceptance and love, Christian schools have the potential to be environments in which a Spirit of Adventure thrives. The key is for students to feel accepted and supported in a way that is disconnected from their achievements, successes, and failures. The irony is that when teachers disconnect their approval from educational outcomes, students become motivated to take risks in a way that ultimately leads to improved learning and so improved outcomes.

Fostering a Spirit of Adventure involves reflecting with students on their steps and missteps, helping students define healthy risk taking, and modeling goal setting. Each and every day in a school can be considered an adventure. We must convince students that no matter what they say when they raise their hand, no matter how well or poorly they perform on a test, no matter the condition of a final project, they and others will learn something. In such a climate, students will be motivated to *learn* and not simply get good grades. Perhaps Mark Twain captured this Condition best when he said, “I never let my schooling get in the way of my education.”

Leadership & Responsibility

In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream at night; and God said, "Ask what you wish me to give you." Solomon said, "Now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king in place of my father David, yet I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in ... So give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" It was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing.

--See 1 Kings 3:5-12

The last two Conditions – Leadership & Responsibility and Confidence to Take Action – are the hoped for outcomes of the previous six Conditions. Although these last two Conditions must be nurtured in their own right, the steps taken to promote previous Conditions are essential. The Condition of Leadership & Responsibility means students are able to express their ideas and become willing to accept consequences for their actions. Students, encouraged to make decisions, are then held accountable for their words and actions. Genuine empowerment of students involves a high degree of trust and invites just, appropriate, and responsible decision making.

Christianity teaches that each person is a moral agent. Each person, while shaped and influenced by others, is ultimately the subject of his or her actions and is accountable as such. This basic principle underlies much of Christian ethics. A Christian approach to moral agency makes two claims. The first is that each person is the author of his or her own life. The decisions a person makes make the person. Second, responsibility requires each person to make decisions based on Christian moral principles and not on personal satisfactions. The impact my decisions have on other people, in particular “the least of these” whom Jesus loves, must not only be taken into account, but must become a criteria for making decisions. The feelings and well-being of others must be considered.

Christian schools that foster a sense of Leadership & Responsibility are open to students’ opinions and ideas and take student input seriously. Opportunities for leadership are available at all levels of school life and in all grades. While responsibility is frequently taught in Christian schools, genuine leadership is sometimes given short shrift. Under such circumstances, we run the risk of reducing moral agency to book learning. Morality then becomes a dead letter. Schools must be environments where students can safely practice Leadership & Responsibility. Such skills, which have a lifelong application, must be enacted if they are to be really learned.

Space must be created for students to reflect on their actions and the consequences of their actions. There are two significant secular trends that schools must counteract if they are to teach Leadership & Responsibility. The first is that others are to blame for what I do. I am not responsible; I am a victim, you are at fault for my actions. The other is that consequences can be disconnected from the actions that caused them. There is a pervasive sense that I can escape the consequences of my actions. Both attitudes are antithetical not only to being a Christian, but to education, which promotes genuine Leadership & Responsibility. Schools can be counter-cultural by teaching other-oriented decision-making and accountability.

Confidence to Take Action

But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God.”

--Luke 1:30

Confidence to Take Action is about students believing in themselves. When this Condition is in place, students are encouraged to dream about their future while being motivated to set goals in the present. A positive and healthy outlook on life characterizes such students. Students who have the confidence to act look inward rather than outward for approval. All of the other Conditions have this Condition as their goal, their purpose. Students are encouraged to become active and involved members of their communities.

Discipleship to Jesus requires action. He asked us to *do* to others what we would have done to us. Unlike moral principles that require us to refrain from acting towards others in ways we would not want others to act towards us, Jesus’ version of the Golden Rule invites us to do, to act, to reach out. The life of discipleship is about a love that is proactive and self-motivated. My conscience becomes an internal, vibrant influence in my life. Discerning my vocation in the world and having the courage and confidence to employ my gifts to serve the world are critical to the life of faith. For Christians, such courage and confidence flow from one’s relationship with God in Jesus. Jesus’ most frequent invitation to his followers was “Do not be afraid.” In other words, be confident.

Christian schools that provide students with the confidence to take action create responsible citizens of the church and society. Such students not only have the self-assurance to make decisions, but they have the courage to act on those decisions. They become powerful and proactive role models within schools and among their peers. When lived out on a consistent basis, this Condition represents the highest aspiration of the human person – to be and to act as a positive influence in one’s environment.

In order to create such a climate, students must come to believe that they can make a difference in the world. Teachers and administrators must be supportive and encouraging. Students must be allowed to make decisions, act on those decisions, experience the consequences of their actions, and reflect back on the entire experience. From such reflection come the decisions that are an advance on previous decisions and actions. When such growth occurs, schools fulfill their mission to create lifelong learners who are responsible forces for positive change in the world. Then we and our students can fulfill Christ’s call to be the light of the world and salt for the earth.

Conclusion

Christian education, if it is about nothing else, is about helping the people of God discern their role in the ongoing, in-breaking of the Reign of God. Such discernment is a question of aligning one's own aspirations with the Aspirations of the One who is the Source of all that is beautiful and true and good and loving. While much schooling is about training, genuine education is about fostering the conditions that make such discernment not only possible, but highly probable.

Christian education is grounded in a tradition that places a high value on community, sponsorship in faith, and human dignity. In addition, celebrating creation, investigating every facet of the human condition, praising God through human artistry, and fearlessly facing life's many challenges are also part of being a follower of Christ. All that we do as Christian educators aims at nurturing responsible, principle centered moral agents capable of affecting positive change in our world.

That these "habits" of the Christian tradition find an echo in the 8 Conditions developed by QISA is not surprising. The 8 Conditions are deeply human attributes. They affect student aspirations because to aspire is itself a deeply and uniquely human characteristic. Christian educators who wish to foster the aspirations, dreams, and hopes of their students would benefit from grounding their efforts in these 8 Conditions. Given the truth that students, no matter their age, are the agents of their own learning, concern for the 8 Conditions should be a foremost concern for all educators.

To learn more about Student Aspirations
or the work of the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations,
please visit
www.qisa.org