Global Perspectives on Spiritual Warfare in the Classroom

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While the challenges of teaching often relate to learning, family, or environmental concerns, there is a growing need in Christian school communities to examine the spiritual landscape of the classroom. Across decades of educational experience, the authors have observed an increasing need for teachers to acquire more skills in the areas of behavior management, stress management, and conflict resolution, and our hypothesis is that these increasing challenges are symptomatic of the spiritual state of our communities.

What happens spiritually in the classroom either undergirds or undermines the spiritual goals of Christian education. While many classrooms and schools are positive, life-transforming communities, some become negative and chaotic. The researchers hypothesize that spiritual warfare might be a central cause to many of our schools’ challenges and an area missing in our teacher training programs and professional development. This project explores whether ACSI pre-K–12 classroom teachers believe that spiritual warfare exists in their classrooms, and if so, how they have addressed it.

Focus of Study

In this study, 702 ACSI pre-K–12 teachers from 29 countries were asked, “As a teacher, have you ever encountered spiritual warfare? What happened and how did you or others confront evil in this context?” Of the 702 responses, 598 (85%) indicated that they experienced spiritual warfare as a teacher (Hetzel and Costillo 2013). Narrative data indicates respondents experienced spiritual warfare through relational discord and lack of unity, demonic oppression, student misbehavior, and emotional disequilibrium. Spiritual warfare was described as daily and palpable in the classroom.

Spiritual Warfare

Spiritual warfare is demonic opposition against God’s work. Spiritual opposition comes from without (e.g., Elijah’s battle with the prophets of Baal), from within (e.g., Elijah’s discouragement and despair as he sat under the broom tree), or from Satan himself (e.g., Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness). Evidence of spiritual opposition can manifest in the physical realm, such as in the trial of Job, the trial of a classroom teacher, the trial of a disciple of Jesus, or manifestations in the unseen heavenly realm (Ephesians 6:12). As 1 Peter 5:8 (NASB) reminds us, “Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” Satan desires to destroy the effective ministry of ACSI Christian educators in the education of children and adolescents.

Three Elements of Spiritual Warfare

Clinton Arnold (1997, 2011b), dean of Talbot School of Theology at Biola University, describes three elements of spiritual warfare: worldly temptations, the human propensity towards sin, and satanic influence.
The three overlapping elements of spiritual warfare encompass our human experiences, providing the perfect confluence for believers to forget their spiritual mooring (Hetzel 2011). Christian educators, indwelt by the Spirit of God (Ephesians 3:14–17), need not fear; the Spirit of God triumphs over evil and can enable Christian educators to withstand the trials of spiritual warfare.

Analysis of the Data

There were 702 respondents to the question, “As a teacher, have you ever encountered spiritual warfare? What happened and how did you or others confront evil in this context?” Of those, 598 responded that they did experience spiritual warfare.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Frequency of Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Relational Discord and Lack of Unity</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Demonic Oppression</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Student Misbehavior</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Emotional Disequilibrium of the Teacher</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Some responses were coded into more than one category.

Relational Discord and Lack of Unity (59%)

Relational discord involves other teachers, students, or parents—and even boards or administration. One preschool teacher described, “I have encountered spiritual warfare in the form of exclusion and backbiting by coworkers.” Another teacher summarized, “I mostly have experienced spiritual warfare in the area of [the challenge of] unity among coworkers.”

Some teachers primarily encountered spiritual warfare through student behavior. For example, a kindergarten teacher wrote, “Spiritual warfare often shows up in a child’s behavior. Prayer is the only answer.” A primary teacher from Taiwan wrote, “I have definitely encountered spiritual warfare with students’ behavior in class or unwillingness to help each other.” Other teachers focused on the struggles with the parents: “Parents’ attitudes made me feel I was being tested and the enemy was putting my Christianity in check.”

Spiritual warfare was also identified among administration and boards. One teacher wrote, “A spirit of deception has blinded the school board in the decisions it has been making.”

Demonic Oppression (20%)

A male kindergarten teacher wrote that he sees demonic oppression in children “in the fears, hatreds and self-worth problems [with which the] students are . . . struggling.” One high school teacher in the Philippines described, “Students occasionally chat to me about demonic activity and fear.”

Student Misbehavior (20%)

A kindergarten teacher from Peru recognized a trend of illness and misbehavior among students during their Spiritual Emphasis Week, reporting, “We had more students sick and some had more behavior issues [that week].”

Emotional Disequilibrium of the Teacher (19%)

A primary teacher wrote, “The spiritual warfare I often face is the lie that I am incompetent at my job. I fight this lie with the truth that I can do all things through Christ.” A middle school teacher wrote, “I experience spiritual warfare on a regular basis. I feel that Satan tries to plant seeds of doubt in my mind related to decisions I’ve made . . . as a teacher.”

Additional Observations

While respondents described specific incidences of spiritual warfare, the data also revealed the dailyness of spiritual warfare. A high school teacher wrote that she experienced spiritual warfare “all the time!” She went on to share, “I try to teach students to expect [spiritual] attack, especially when they have set out to do something very intentionally for God.” A teacher from the United Kingdom wrote, “During Bible time I could see the children getting distracted and very restless when I started talking about salvation.” Another teacher mentioned that a student of his “would become like a dog, barking and crawl[ing] on floor . . .” Teachers often described chaos, confusion, heaviness, or feelings of eeriness surrounding their awareness of demonic forces.

Countering Spiritual Warfare

When asked how they counter spiritual warfare, 49% of respondents cited prayer and 11% cited Scripture. Five subthemes about how teachers prayed emerged as researchers coded each narrative response. (Some responses were coded in more than one category.)

1. Secular strategy: respondents combined prayer with a secular strategy (e.g., psychological assessment) that non-Christians would also deem wise.
2. Sacred strategy: respondents combined prayer with other sacred, biblically supported strategies, such as fasting, trusting God, or confronting sin.
3. Corporate prayer: the teacher gathered strength by joining in prayer with colleagues.
4. Supplication: the teacher prayed for specific things in regard to the spiritual warfare issue.
5. Individual prayer: the teacher prayed individually, with no indication he or she was praying with other believers.
Upon further review of responses involving prayer, researchers explored spiritual warfare prayer strategy subthemes.

A rebuke or power encounter refers to taking a stand against supernatural evil forces, and includes laying on of hands, rebuking in the name of Jesus, claiming the blood of Jesus, and putting on the armor of God. Sacred strategies included fasting, forgiving, confronting sin, seeking godly counsel, relying on the Holy Spirit, and worship. Secular strategies are strategies nonbelievers would utilize to handle a challenging classroom situation, including classroom management practices, efforts to improve communication, and diligence in classroom preparation. The strategic use of the Word included reading Scripture aloud, memorizing verses, and praying Scripture. Body of Christ involvement included recruiting prayer warriors, seeking godly counsel or guidance in prayer, receiving encouragement through prayer, and scheduling times for fellowship and corporate prayer. Again, responses could be coded into more than one category.

Conclusion

As one teacher commented, “the very act of education is spiritual warfare, shining the light of truth into the darkness of ignorance.” It is, therefore, critical that teachers know and use the Word of God, as Jesus did, as they engage in spiritual warfare throughout the school day. The emphasis of the data on prayer and the Word of God was aligned with the training of Jesus’ disciples and the historical training of the catechumen in the early church (Arnold 2011a; Glazer 1992).

The study provides vivid insight into global spiritual warfare conditions in ACSI schools, providing evidence and argumentation to advance spiritual warfare training for pre-service and in-service Christian educators worldwide, particularly as it relates to prayer and a deepened understanding of biblically based spiritual warfare strategies in the context of education.

Note: To read a more detailed report, see expanded article in the 2016 issue of Justice, Spirituality, and Education Journal.

References

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